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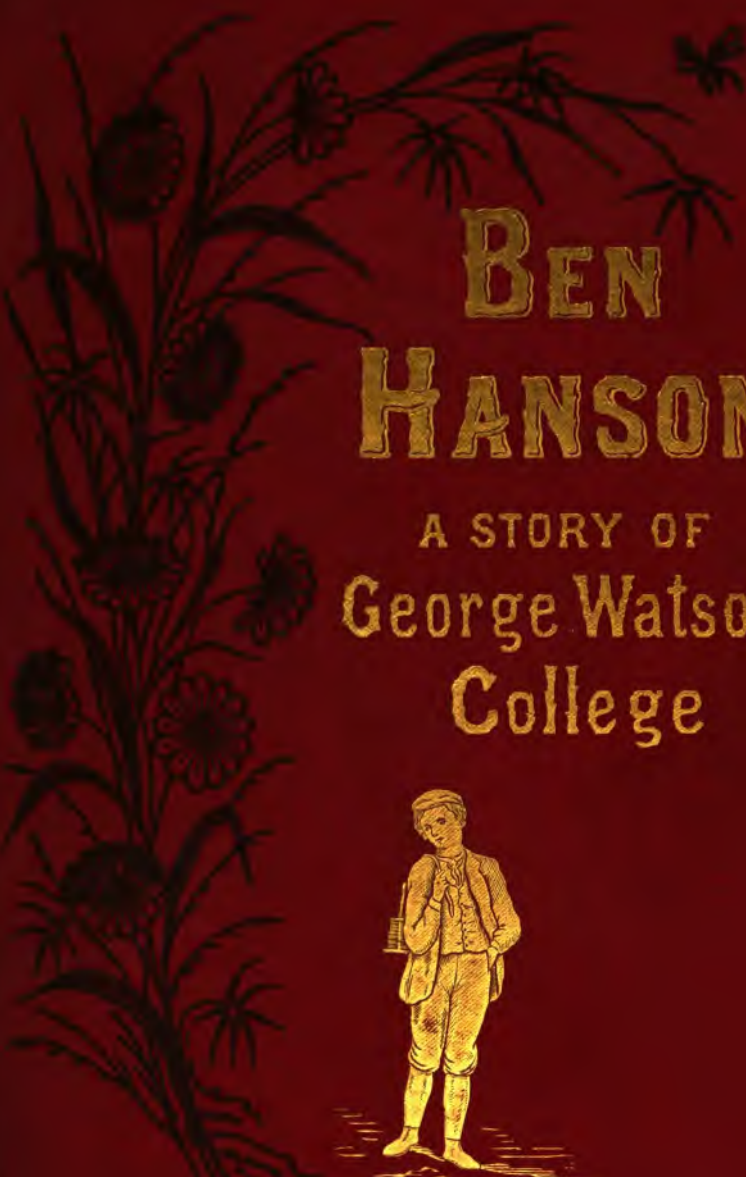
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BEN HANSON

A STORY OF
George Watson's
College





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BEN HANSON



BEN HANSON.

Frontispiece.

BEN HANSON

A Story of George Watson's College

BY

JESSIE M. E. SAXBY

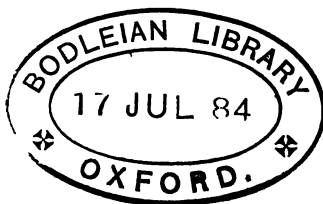
AUTHOR OF 'GEORDIE ROVE,' 'BREAKERS AHEAD,' 'THE ONE WEE LASSIE,'
'STORIES OF SHETLAND,' ETC. ETC.

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DEDICATED

TO

Harry Sarby Edmondston,

WHO IS BOUND TO MY HEART BY A

THREEFOLD CORD.





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Ben Hanson.

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BEN HANSON.

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CHAPTER I.

FOOLISH FANCIES.

 H, mother, how I should like to be a sailor! It would be such fun going all over the world, and seeing such numbers of people and curious things. And no lessons to learn, and nobody nagging at a fellow for ever about brushing his hair or rubbing his boots on the mat.'

Mrs. Hanson smiled at Ben's ill-considered speech, but replied good-naturedly,—

'You think you would be quite happy if you were spared those odious duties! You forget, my dear Ben, that a sailor is required to be quite as particu-

lar about tidiness as other folks, and that he has to learn lessons as well as you.'

Ben opened his eyes. 'Oh, I do not think that can be, mother! Jack Wilson says that he never looked at a book from the time he left Liverpool till he reached Sydney.'

'Jack is no rule for *you*. We all know that he is an idle boy, and has no wish to get on in life. He will never rise in any profession, but will stick as a common "hand before the mast" all his days. I hope your ambition is something higher and nobler than that of foolish Jack Wilson.'

'Of course,' answered Ben decidedly. 'I would not be anything less than a captain. But one does not need to learn no end of lessons to be *that*.'

'You are a more ignorant boy than I thought you were, Ben. Why, you would have to study as earnestly to reach that position as you are obliged to do to enter your father's profession.'

'I hate the thought of business, mother,' cried the boy. 'I know I shall never get on at a desk. To think of having to sit over sums all day long!' And Ben flung out of the room in a very discontented mood.

He sauntered around the garden for quite half an hour, when he ought to have been learning his lessons for next day; but Ben's imagination had

been fired by young Wilson's exaggerated tales of sea life, and geography, arithmetic, and Latin were not to be tolerated just then.

After a time he was joined by his sisters—twin girls of eleven. They had finished their work and had come out to play with minds free from all anxious thoughts of the morrow.

Ben was usually very good-natured, and took pleasure in inventing amusements for them, so that they generally hailed his appearance with delight.

But Ben was known to be guilty of evading work whenever he had the chance, and the girls were sure that he could not possibly have got through his lessons that afternoon, seeing that it had been spent in Craigmillar woods with Jack Wilson.

'Come along and I will give you a swing,' he said.

Like all idle or discontented people, Ben hated to be left to his own society. But the girls, knowing that their mother would be vexed with Ben for neglecting his studies, hung back from accepting his offer.

'Won't you go and finish your lessons first?' said Bella; and her echo, Cassie, added, 'And afterwards we will have a grand game.'

'I won't! There!' exclaimed Ben. 'I hate school, and wish I were done with it. I don't see

why I should not get my own way as well as other boys, and choose my own profession.'

This was *not* the first time that Ben had so expressed himself, so the girls were not surprised.

'How discontented you are!' was all they said.

'Discontented! Perhaps you would be the same if you were in my place. Girls have nothing to do when they leave school but enjoy themselves—play the piano, and fuss over fancy work. If you knew that all your lessons were to end in nailing you to an office desk you would grumble too, I am sure.'

'We are not going to be idle,' said Bella, with an air of grave dignity which became her little person well. 'We mean to work for mother and each other as you will do, Ben.'

'As I will do if I am allowed to follow my own tastes. Not otherwise, I can tell you.'

'Oh, Ben! did you not promise father to do as dear mother wished always?'

'Well! Suppose mother wishes what I wish. It will be all right in that case, won't it?'

'What *do* you wish?'

'I want to go to sea to be a sailor.'

'Oh, Ben!' they cried; 'how could you think of going away and leaving us? Mother would have no one to take care of her; and you know the doctor said she would soon have to lie upon the sofa

altogether. You could not dream of leaving her like that.'

'You don't know what you are talking about, children,' exclaimed this self-asserting young gentleman of fourteen, thinking himself quite grown up, and the twins mere babies. Then he left them, as he had left his mother, in a very unamiable manner.





CHAPTER II.

A PROMISE GIVEN.

BEN HANSON was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. It was true that less than a year before the time of which I am speaking, he had promised his dying father that he would be dutiful to the parent left, and protect his young sisters from the trials and snares of life. There was no one but himself to do so, and already the twins had begun to look up to Ben as their guardian, and appeal to him in difficulties.

Already the mother had begun to dwell, with a woman's trusting faith, upon the time when Ben would stand in his father's place to her, as well as to her girls.

All that Ben knew. He was well aware of how many hopes were centred in him. How, then,

could he act in direct opposition to the wishes of all?

Ah! when we determine obstinately on a certain course—be it right or wrong—we soon contrive to make ourselves believe that no other course could be so proper for us to follow.

Though Ben knew what his father had desired, what his mother prayed for, what his sisters expected; yet he determined to yield to his own inclinations, so directly opposed to the wishes of his friends.

His favourite books were tales of adventure, and these were always largely made up of sea-stories. In those books very little was said of the hardships attending the life of a mariner, and Ben had convinced himself that sailors had little to do but hoist sails, while a soul-inspiring call rang out, or strut about the decks in picturesque uniform, or stand in theatrical attitudes by the wheel, or do gallant actions for which gold medals were awarded! Such literature could not but rouse the thirst for sea life in a restless, unstable nature.

Moreover, Jack Wilson had given such a glowing picture of even a cabin-boy's existence, that Ben is to be excused in part for adopting such opinions.

But Jack was not a trustworthy authority, for he had been sent to sea because he was an idle, shiftless

lad ~~who~~ would not work on land, and his father feared he would fall into bad habits, if allowed to follow his own inclinations.

Jack's captain was his own uncle, a kind-hearted indulgent man, who loved the lad as if he had been his own son, and treated him with a forbearance which Jack by no means deserved, consequently he saw nothing of the dark side of sea life. He had made only one voyage to Australia, and that had been an exceptionally fortunate voyage. So you see Jack Wilson was not at all fitted to give Ben an unbiassed statement.

Ben had grumbled about his lessons so often, and had concocted so many schemes regarding his future, each plan always differing from its predecessor, and contrary to what he knew was expected of him, that his mother never paid much heed to what he said on the subject, but merely urged him to work away at school; and when his education there was completed, there would be time enough to begin making up his mind about a choice of profession.

At the same time, Mrs. Hanson kept before Ben's view that he was expected to accept a situation which had been promised him in the bank where his father had worked faithfully and long, and it was against that prosaic future which the boy's mind rebelled most.

Yet, in spite of his angry sullen mood, which made duty irksome and study an impossibility, Ben was haunted that evening by a picture which had often, during the past year, presented itself before him in his softer moments. It was in vain that he strove to banish it by dwelling on thoughts of 'life on the ocean wave.' His heart was not callous, and conscience could make itself heard, notwithstanding the wilfulness to which he had given the reins of self-government.

The picture was of a death-bed scene—the passing away of his own father. Ben saw (in thought) the wasted features, the expression of suffering, the weary gaze. He heard the voice, once so strong and full of cheer, speak in the hollow tones of the dying, and this was what the voice said: 'Ben, I leave them to you—a heavy care for such young shoulders, but you will not shrink, my boy? The road will be difficult, and you will have to practise much self-denial, but your duty to mother and sisters is a sacred one. I charge you to act faithfully by them. You are young, young, my son! Yet you have seen and shared some of the anxieties of my last days, and will not disappoint our hopes. It is God's will to call you early to the battle of life. Promise me to buckle on armour and stand fast by your duty.'

And Ben promised — promised to obey his

mother and protect his sisters—promised with his father's hand clasped in his, and his father's eyes upon him—promised solemnly, and with a full knowledge of the responsibilities to which he was called—promised, and received the blessing of his dying parent.





CHAPTER III.

IN DISGRACE.

 F course Ben went to the foot of all his classes next day, but that would not have mattered much if the voice of conscience had been potent enough to rouse him to a due sense of his folly.

But alas! a long refreshing sleep had banished the vision of his father, and he went to school not caring one bit whether he was dux or dunce. He was kept in school half an hour after his companions, and he thought that very hard. He thought it harder still to have tasks set to do when he went home, as an additional punishment. He could not claim his mother's sympathy in such troubles, and when he grumbled to the twins they merely answered, 'It must have been your own fault, Ben. What a pity!'

Then he sought Jack Wilson and informed him

that all the masters at George Watson's College had conspired to ill-use him !

'The lubbers!' said Jack. 'Why don't you cut the whole affair, Ben? You are only wasting time and learning nothing, when you might be enjoying life in the best way imaginable. If I were you, I would give your mother no peace till she let you off to see the world in a fine big ship. Why, you might sail with me. Uncle says we shall go in a fortnight. Think of that! off on the wide sea two weeks hence if you like to make a stand, once for all.'

Ben was too ashamed of himself to tell his worthless companion of the promise he had so solemnly given; so he only replied, 'Oh, I am afraid I can't do that just yet. Mother can't do without me yet.'

But the idea which Jack had put into his head kept growing and shaping itself. 'Cut the whole affair.' There was very little sense in the words, according to English rules of speech, and very little sense in them according to moral rules of action; but Ben knew—as what boy does not?—the full significance of Jack's words.

He kept thinking of those words instead of doing his work, and asking himself, 'Suppose I *were to cut the whole affair*, what would be the result? Mother would cry, no doubt, but only for a little. She is always telling me that what can't be cured

must be endured, and that troubles are always made worse by fretting over them. So I think she would reconcile herself to anything I did—if it were done before she knew anything about it.

‘The talking and arguing about any change of plan always makes it look more difficult, more objectionable ; so I do believe, when I make up my mind what I mean to do, I shall just—go and do it without saying a word, and then there will be no fuss, and it will end all right enough. I am sure I could help mother much better by going to sea than by staying here and attending school like this. Why, even in clothes, and lunch pence, and school-books, I cost her a heap of money ; as for boots, I have had three pairs in one year, and they have been mended oftener than I can count. No expenses of that sort on the sea, nor of any sort ; so that I would be able to send mother all I earned instead of using her money as I am doing.

‘And I am sure the girls do very well without me, and I don’t see that they will ever want me for anything, for they are all-in-all to each other. If they were boys I might have to punch a big fellow’s head for bullying them, or back them in a row ; but as it is, they don’t need any such help, and won’t want me when they grow up either.

‘I do believe the best thing I can do is to follow Jack’s advice, and I almost think—indeed I am

sure—that father would not object if he knew how much I dislike the thought of that horrid bank. I really do not see that I would be evading any duty by following the bent of my genius; for I have heard it said that fellows should be encouraged to launch out upon any calling which they show a decided *turn* for.’

Ben spent the greater part of that day pondering after the above fashion, and arguing with himself, and of course his lessons were again imperfectly learned.

‘Ben Hanson, I must send you to the Doctor if this shameful conduct goes on much longer,’ said one teacher.

‘Ben Hanson, you are a disgrace to my class,’ thundered a master not much gifted with patience; and at that moment the Head of the College entered the room. It was his custom to visit the classes in that informal way, and acquaint himself with the progress made by each pupil. He heard the teacher’s words, and his keen eyes fell upon Ben sitting, dogged and defiant, in the dunce’s seat.

‘Here again, Ben!’ said Dr. Ogilvie in his short way; but in a low tone, which reached few ears beyond those who he meant should hear. He laid his hand on the boy’s shoulder, and shot a glance at him which read him through. ‘Come to my study after school,’ said the Doctor, and passed on. And

if Ben had done as he was told, his future life would not have been darkened by the shadow of a wrong step taken in early life.

Unfortunately a companion whispered in Ben's ear, after the Doctor had gone, 'You will catch it this time.'

'Catch it! The Doctor doesn't wallop his boys. He is not an English cane-loving bully, Tom Watkins,' retorted Ben.

Tom, hailing from Surrey, pinched Ben's arm and answered, 'I know what Dr. Ogilvie's taws is like, for all that;' and in spite of himself, Ben trembled.





CHAPTER IV.

‘WHY NOT CUT THE WHOLE AFFAIR?’

HHE deservedly popular Headmaster of that College possessed the rare power of reading boy-nature like an open book, and of being able to lead even refractory pupils.

He had been watching Ben Hanson narrowly for weeks (although Ben did not know it), and he had guessed correctly what was the cause of the boy's indifference and idle habits—which I must do Ben the justice to say were of late growth.

It was Dr. Ogilvie's intention to talk kindly and seriously to Ben, and to open his eyes to the foolishness of yielding to such careless propensities. The Doctor's heart was ever tender over fatherless boys, and he knew that he could make Ben sensible of his mistakes. But Ben did not give his kind master the

chance of setting him right ; and the appeal to his better nature, which the Doctor had made successfully to many a worse boy than Ben, was never spoken.

When the school was dismissed, Tom Watkins jeeringly said, 'Now, Ben, off and get your licking.' Tom knew, and Ben knew, that the Doctor very rarely thrashed any of his boys, and that when he did, it was because they deserved that and more. But Ben's conscience told him that he merited the taws, so, not relishing such a prospect, he ran home instead of presenting himself before Dr. Ogilvie. Such cowardice only added to his misery, for he knew very well that he was only making matters worse, and next day would bring a yet more severe punishment.

Foolish Ben ! if he had judged his master by past treatment, and not by the accusations of self, he would have known that a hand, firm and gentle, was being held out to help rather than to chastise him.

However, Ben could not, or would not, see the matter from a right point of view, and persisted in taking a wrong course. But thus it always happens. One false step leads to many more, and the farther one goes on the wrong track, the more difficult it becomes to retrace one's steps.

Ben's clouded brow told his mother that he was in trouble, and she tenderly pressed him to tell her

what was wrong. He would have been wise if he had complied with her gentle entreaty. But no! He would not say a word, and went away to Craig-millar woods to brood over his grievances alone.

It was a horrible shame, he told himself. If the master had not **shouted** like that, the Doctor would not **have** noticed anything. If mother had only complied with his wishes, he would have been quit of school, its tasks and taws.

Then the Tempter whispered Jack Wilson's suggestion :

'Why not cut the whole affair?'

'Nonsense!' said Ben's better self to his evil genius; 'how on earth can I do that?'

'Easily enough. Plenty of ships going out of Leith Docks every day.'

'But no captain would take me without mother's consent, and *that* she won't give. Not just now, at least, and *just now* is my tribulation.'

The Tempter did not argue the point. He was too subtle for that; but he reminded Ben of his mother's only brother, who had run away from a harsh guardian and had hid himself among the cargo of an outward-bound ship. He had not been discovered until the vessel was half-way across the Atlantic; but when he crawled from his place of concealment the sailors were kind to him. The captain gave him food and clothes, and when they



'WHY NOT CUT THE WHOLE AFFAIR?'—Page 26.



reached New York he was taken on shore. Employment was found for him, and he had thriven until he had become a wealthy man.

The Tempter did not remind Ben of his mother's tears whenever she spoke of that brother, nor of her words, 'He left me to struggle alone.'

Ben forgot that *he* had no harsh guardian from whom he required to fly.

'I don't see why I should not get on as well as that uncle,' said Ben to himself.

'I don't see why you should not do as he did,' said the Tempter.

'Nonsense!' said Ben the second time. Yet he pondered over the 'nonsense,' and pondered it to his own hurt.

He remained out in the wood until evening was far advanced, and when he returned home his mother said very sadly, 'Ben, you are grieving me much by neglecting your studies. How can you possibly expect to keep up in class if you spend all your time wandering out of doors? I am afraid you will be severely dealt with if this goes on.'

'I don't care,' said Ben. 'I don't want to learn anything more. I think it is a shame to keep me grinding at lessons when I want to be away working in a much nicer way.'

'The old story, Ben,' Mrs. Hanson sighed; 'change, change, seems to be your besetting sin. If I were

to let you do as you now wish, you would soon be longing for something else.'

'No, I would not, I am sure ; I would stick to the sea if you would only be persuaded to let me go.'

'I have no wish to oppose your inclinations beyond a certain limit, Ben, and if, by and by, you are still determined upon going to sea,—if you can forget what you undertook to perform,—I shall say no more against it. You shall be free to go.'





CHAPTER V.

THE WRONG ROAD.

BEN'S sleep was disturbed that night, for notwithstanding the conditional consent which he understood his mother to have given, he yet knew that he was in the wrong. Moreover, between the realization of his wishes and the present lay (so he took for granted) Dr. Ogilvie's taws on the morrow, and another session or two at school beyond that.

And in spite of every argument which he could bring in justification of himself, there lurked a conviction that, even if his mother agreed to his fancy and he embarked on a seafaring life, he would break his promise to the dead, and forfeit the blessing bestowed by a dying father.

These were thoughts to disturb the deepest

slumber, and Ben got up next morning unrefreshed, and more afraid than ever to face censure. He sat down to breakfast moody and ill at ease, and though the lively twins tried every device to win him to better temper, yet all their efforts were in vain. Often his mother glanced anxiously across the table, but Ben would not meet her searching gaze.

School-time came, and he went as usual to say good-bye to Mrs. Hanson before leaving. Then she put her arm affectionately round his neck and whispered, 'Tell me what ails you, my son. Surely I can smooth your difficulties a little, or at least share them.'

The unhappy boy gulped down an inclination to cry, and with that same effort drowned the confession of his errors which was rising to his lips.

'It is not anything that you can help,' he said, turning from her loving touch and look.

'What is it? at least you can tell me *that*.' He tried to laugh as he answered, 'Only a thrashing waiting me for lessons badly done;' and taking up his books, he went out without kissing the twins as usual.

Much aggrieved by this forgetfulness, Cassie ran after him and insisted upon having her good-bye. Then, a little ashamed of himself, Ben

turned back to wait for Bella, standing in the doorway looking wistfully after him.

Just then Ben caught sight of his pale mother at the dining-room window. She was looking at him with tender love, anxiety, and longing in her gaze, and never, never did the boy forget that look. It haunted him in later life, and he said that it always stood before him in after years when he was being tempted to do a wrong action. She tried to smile when she caught his eye, but her lips trembled and her head drooped suddenly. Whether she wept or prayed Ben knew not, nor thought of pausing to know; he went down the street and forgot everything but the punishment which he would assuredly receive at his school that day.

As he walked slowly onwards, the jeers of his classmates seemed to ring in his ears. He pictured to himself how the masters would look, and what Dr. Ogilvie would say. Slowly and more slowly walked Ben. He took the longest route he could think of,—indeed, he made more than one detour from even that longest way to George Watson's College,—and heard the bell ring the boys into school when he was still at a good distance. He was just so far away that not even if he ran his fastest could he be there until prayers were over and lessons begun. Then he would have to sneak into the class-room, and take his seat at the lower end

of the lowest form under the eyes of teacher and companions.

He had not learned one of the lessons for that day, and he had disregarded the Doctor's order—and no boy could do *that* with impunity.

The ordeal before him was more than Ben, in his present state of mind, could bear; and he fairly turned his back on school, wandering off in an opposite direction, with listless gait and sullen brow.

A boy sauntering idly along with a strap full of school-books over his shoulder, long after all the schools have begun their morning work, is likely to attract attention.

More than one policeman, meeting Ben as he slouched along with his head bent, said to him in a friendly manner, 'You should get into school, boy, without more delay.' 'Where are you going at this hour? take care you are not on a wrong track.'

Others besides policemen looked curiously at him, and a grocer's boy called out, 'Feared for the taws, puir baby!' This annoyed Ben so much that at last he tossed his books over a garden railing, and took his way towards a less frequented neighbourhood.

By and by his eye fell upon the Firth, upon the vessels going up and down over the bright restless

waves, and then he thought again of Jack Wilson's words, ' Why not cut the whole affair ? '

There was no power left in Ben Hanson that day to combat temptation ; and gradually his footsteps turned towards Leith, and ever as he drew nearer and nearer to the docks, he yielded more and more to the voice of the Tempter.





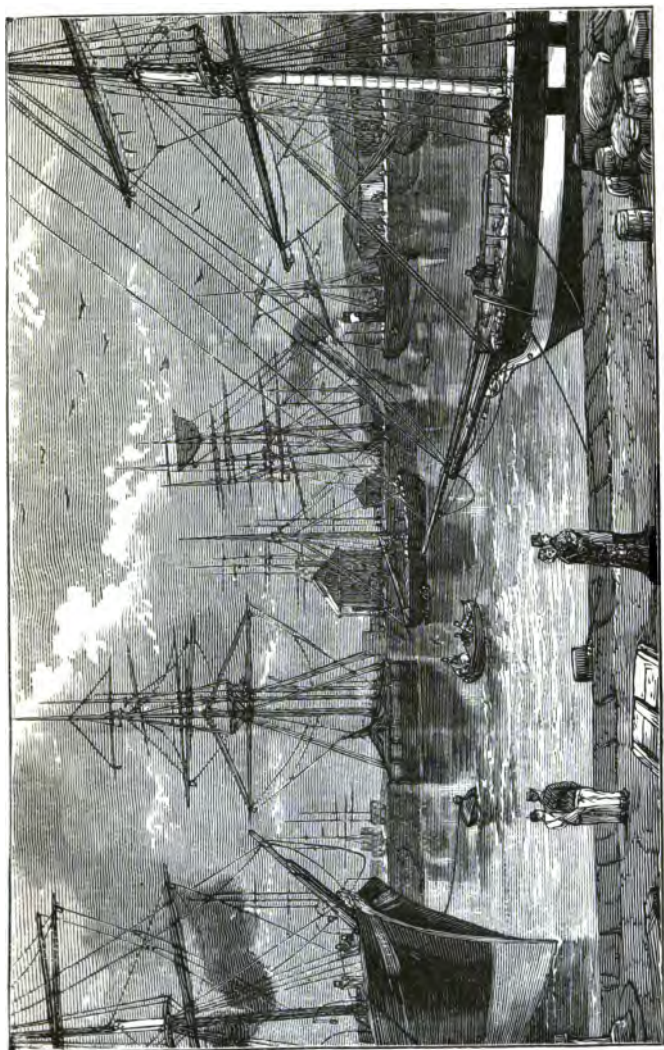
CHAPTER VI.

'I'M AFLOAT.'

IT is not so easy as you would suppose to get on board a ship in dock without being observed, for amid the apparent confusion reigns perfect order, and a person having no business there is soon detected.

Ben Hanson soon found that he would have much difficulty in stealing on board ship. Men, seeing a well-dressed lad skulking near, bade him to go about his business, or look alive and turn out of that. And, worst of all, some asked him if he were trying to run away.

He wandered here, there, and everywhere among the shipping, and saw no chance of getting unnoticed on board any vessel flying the Blue Peter ; yet, curiously enough, the difficulties which presented themselves provoked Ben into trying yet more, until at last every thought became swallowed



LEITH DOCKS.

up in the one eager desire to secure his object. After an hour or two an opportunity arrived.

He was leaning against a railing, looking at a small barque taking in the last of her cargo. All the crew were busy at their work except the cabin-boy, and he was watching Ben. Thought that boy, *He's* a runaway, and would be company on the voyage if he happened to get on board of us.' Ben, looking at the ship with longing eyes, heard a voice near at hand ask, in a low tone, 'Want a passage, mate?'

Ben started and stared at the cabin-boy, who had come as close to the railing as possible. The barque was moored to the pier, so that the two were in close proximity; and Ben, looking at the other's leering face, thought he had never seen a more wicked one. But he answered promptly, 'Yes; I want a passage if I can get it on the sly.'

'All square,' replied the other; 'we go out with the full tide in about an hour. Come on deck quite bold-like,—you are a friend of mine. Do you understand?'

Ben understood, and stepped over the bulwark in a moment. 'Do you see that pile of casks down there?' whispered the cabin-boy, pointing down an opening in the deck; 'watch a chance, and dive down among them when I go aft. Don't lose time,

and don't be frightened. Folk on the pier will think you are one of the ship's boys, and I'll take care that the crew don't notice you.'

The speaker walked away, and, going into the steward's pantry, said, 'Give me a biscuit and something for a poor chap who has come on board in a bad way.'

'No business on board,' growled the steward, but, handing Jim some food, said, 'Give the fellow that and send him off directly.'

Jim came back to the place where he had left Ben, but no Ben was there, for he had taken his new friend's hint, and had gone down among the casks.

Jim took one peep and saw the other creeping out of sight below; so the cabin-boy went back to the steward and told him that the 'chap' had disappeared, probably sent off by some of the men.

Poor foolish Ben! he was hiding among a chaos of boxes and barrels before he exactly knew what he was about. I think, if one thought of mother and home had crossed his mind, that he would have paused, and gone back to them; but alas! his whole thoughts were given up to dread of discovery. He slipped behind some casks, and believed he had found a snug berth, but in an instant he fancied he could be seen from the hole above, so he stole

into a yet more remote corner, and lay there, panting and trembling, until it occurred to him that there was a still more secure place a little farther down.

He crept on and on, and at last stretched himself behind a huge hogshead, and there waited, hoping that the cabin-boy would come down and talk to him. But no one came near the place, and presently a board was pushed across the opening overhead, and Ben was left in solitary darkness.

After that the noises on deck changed their character. Until then, there had been the perpetual groaning of the chains and pulleys used in bringing heavy loads on board, but now there was heard the hauling of ropes, the tightening of cordage, the unloosening of many a detaining cable. By that time Ben's overstrained nerves became utterly unable to bear more, and he fell into a heavy sleep, which was not so much sleep as a lethargy or swooning of the senses. It was profound, dreamless, stupefying. How unlike the slumber which had been his at home in his own little room close to that of his mother!

After some hours the boy came to himself again, and he was aware of a strange cessation of all the confusion of noises which had been going on when he fell asleep.

Now he heard nothing but the swish of the water

outside the thick 'wooden wall' against which he rested, and the occasional bass voice of a tar overhead.

'I'm afloat,' said Ben within himself, with a queer mixture of exultation and regret.

'Easily done after all, and can't be undone *now*,' jeered the Tempter, whose chief pleasure lies in the misery of those whom he has persuaded to follow his bidding.

'Lost to mother and home,' whispered conscience sadly; and at that voice the boy uttered a moan, and tried to rise from his cramped position. But either want of food, sea-sickness, or the pangs of remorse were too much for him. Ben found he could not stir, and he lay there, abject, wretched, alone for hours.

He could hear the sea ripple as the ship cut her way through its crests. He knew when the short broken water of the Firth was exchanged for the wider sea by the long roll of the waves, and the lengthened dip which the barque made as she plunged forward.

Ben could not tell whether it was day or night, and when he tried to crawl from the spot, he found that the cargo among which he lay had shifted its position somewhat, or else the darkness confused him; for what was *up* or what was *down* he could not tell.



'I'M AFLOAT.'—Page 42.



The air was stifling, and helped to bewilder his faculties ; so there he lay, helpless, terrified, stunned, and could neither come out from hiding, nor call for aid.

He was soon incapable of any acute feeling beyond a sensation of fear ; and gradually a sort of dull wonder at his position superseded even terror, and then he slept again.





CHAPTER VII.

WAITING FOR BEN.

MRS. HANSON did not wonder when Ben's usual hour of return arrived and he did not come. No doubt he would be detained by the punishment which he had said was in store for him; and the mother's heart yearned over the truant undergoing (as she supposed) the half-hour's detention which was usually part of the punishment. Nor did she feel uneasy when the afternoon advanced, and still he did not come, for Ben had lately fallen into a habit of stealing away with companions after school, instead of coming directly home, as he ought to have done.

But Mrs. Hanson was considerably astonished at receiving a visit from Dr. Ogilvie, who had taken for granted that Ben had played truant that day.

'I thought it likely,' said the master, 'that he would return to you about the usual time, and allow you to suppose that he had been at school as usual.'

Then the Doctor told her of Ben's scrapes, and his (Dr. Ogilvie's) intention to talk to the boy instead of punishing him. They waited together for some time, hoping that Ben would come; but as the truant never appeared, his kind master left, telling Mrs. Hanson to bring her son to him next morning, and desiring her to assure Ben that he had no taws to dread!

No suspicion of the terrible truth crossed Mrs. Hanson's mind, and she did not feel at all uneasy until the evening began to fall, and still the boy did not return. After dark she sent to Mr. Wilson's, thinking that Ben might be with Jack, or that Jack might know where Ben was likely to be found. But Jack had not seen his companion all that day.

Mrs. Hanson's fears grew as the moments sped, and each time the bell rang she ran to the door, hoping it was her boy who had come, yet fearing it might be a messenger of evil tidings.

No news of him came to her; and inquiries at the Hospital and Police Office proved that he had neither come by an accident, nor committed any fault to bring him within police jurisdiction.

The neighbours tried to comfort his mother by assuring her that he would turn up all right before long, and they cited instances of boys playing truant in the same way; but Mrs. Hanson could not feel that it made *her* sorrow less to know that other women had suffered in the same way.

She thought of her tenderly-nurtured boy wandering, hungry and tired, about the fields and woods, lying down to sleep like a wild beast without any shelter, beset by fear, by cold, by conscience. Oh, how she prayed for her prodigal through the hours of that long night, little dreaming where he spent it!

She was down-stairs, restless and frightened, at daybreak. Every footfall on the street she thought must be his. But Ben came not!

At an early hour Mr. Wilson and his son Jack came to her.

‘Have you heard of him?’ the anxious mother cried.

‘No,’ said Mr. Wilson gravely; ‘but I have brought Jack to tell you what he said to me last night, for I think it may put us on the right track.’

Then Jack (taking care to suppress his own words) repeated a great deal that Ben had said to him about going to sea, about running off to sea.

‘And my opinion,’ said Mr. Wilson, ‘is that the

foolish boy has slipped away in search of a ship, and we may find him about the docks yet.'

Just then a schoolboy arrived, carrying Ben's strap and books, which had been found that morning. His name and address on the books had guided the finder to Mrs. Hanson, and the garden in which they had been discovered was situated in Leith Walk, far away from Ben's home or school.

No doubt he had been going to Leith Docks when he discarded the strap.

Mr. Wilson lost no time in following up the clue thus obtained, and received confirmatory evidence from various people, which left no doubt that the boy had hid himself in some ship. Every vessel in dock or port was searched, but (as we know) Ben was in none of these. Then a porter said he remembered noticing a well-dressed boy, answering the description given of Ben, on the deck of a barque which had sailed on the previous day. The man could not say where the boy went, whether on shore or with the ship, but he was positive that it must have been the runaway, for he had thought at the time that the young face looked 'kind of scared,' and the boy's whole appearance left an impression that he had no business where he then was.

That was heart-breaking news to carry back to Mrs. Hanson, who was trying to sustain herself with

the belief that her fervent supplications to Almighty God would be answered speedily, and her boy be restored to her. She had yet to learn, poor mother, that He who walketh in mystery guides every event to its issue by ways and means altogether different from those which finite man employs.





CHAPTER VIII.

A LIVING SORROW.

IT has been often said that 'death is better than a living sorrow,' and truly Mrs. Hanson felt that she would rather have wept over Ben's grave than mourn him as she did. 'Surely,' she said, 'it would have been less bitter to think of him a guileless, loving, docile child, called to his Father's home on high, than know him on the earth callous, rebellious, a vagrant at the mercy of rough strangers, a wanderer from the right way.'

Gladly would she have reproached herself for his folly, and tried to believe that she had not managed him in the proper way, that his undutiful conduct was the result of undue forbearance on her part, or too strict discipline; but her judgment acquitted her of blame in those respects, and sorrowfully she

cried, 'He has wilfully chosen a wrong course, and his sin will find him out, my poor, misguided boy !'

The twins were inconsolable at first, but fortunately were too young to share their mother's foreboding fears on Ben's account, and only grieved because he was gone they knew not where. Even when she lay in tears and agony during the first days of her bereavement, the girls were seeing light in the cloud, as sanguine, trusting childhood does, and in a short time they began to talk of when Ben would come back to them 'a big, brown sailor.'

'Ah,' sighed the mother, 'he may come back—nay, I am sure he *will* come back—and you will welcome him, but *I* will not be here to look upon my darling's face.'

Mrs. Hanson had been in very bad health for some years, and the physicians had told her that worse symptoms were creeping on apace, and would soon lay her aside altogether. She had bravely insisted upon knowing the truth regarding her state, and it was for that reason that she had been so anxious for Ben to remain at home, so that he might be near his sisters when she became a confirmed invalid.

It had not been apprehended that Mrs. Hanson's illness would have a rapid termination, but neither doctor nor patient had calculated on a sudden and heavy affliction coming to hasten disease.

Alas! Ben had broken his mother's heart, and from the time of his departure she grew daily more feeble and more sad. She did not lose hope,—she was too good a Christian for that,—and hourly spoke with strong faith of her boy coming home repentant; yet she never believed that she would see him come.

The twins, little thoughtful creatures, did all that was possible to comfort her.

'Cheer up, mother,' Bella would say; 'I am sure Ben is very sorry by this time that he ran away without one word of good-bye, and he will be writing to you to say so soon.'

Then Cassie, who always acted as Bella's supplement, would add, 'Make haste and get well, mother dear, for Ben will come back a *good* boy, and you will not like him to see you so white and thin.'

They were speaking like that only a fortnight after Ben had disappeared,—so suddenly had the mother's small stock of strength gone down before the unexpected blow which her son had struck,—but though they hoped thus, no token came from the runaway to cheer them. It was scarcely possible that news of him could come if he were on board the barque *Dolphin*, as had been supposed, for she was bound for a port in northern Russia, and was not likely to speak any inward bound ship, or put into any harbour unless she sustained damage on the way.

Mrs. Hanson tried to be patient and reasonable, and if she had been sure that Ben was in that vessel she would have reconciled herself in part. But there was no proof. Other ships had left Leith that day. He might have gone in any one of these. It was the utter uncertainty about him which made the heavier part of his mother's trial, and it was only by frequent wrestling in prayer that she was enabled to overcome despair, and leave her boy in the hands of the Father.

But one night Mrs. Hanson had a dream about Ben, and though I am no believer in visions of the night as exponents of events happening or to happen, yet I think that at rare times it may be given to some of us to experience in that way a little of the power of the spiritual life within us. I do not pretend to explain such dreams by any known law of science, and as little do I mean to assert that they are entirely governed by spiritual agencies. I only know that they do occur, and that it was true that Ben's mother had a very vivid dream about him when he had been away more than a month.

Whether the picture conjured up by maternal longing and fear was a true one, you will learn by and by.

She fancied she was looking on a rocky coast lashed by tempestuous seas, and that the ship in which her boy had sailed was driving disabled upon

the shore. She thought she saw the pale faces of the men as wave on wave swept their decks, and they knew that they were nearing destruction. But *one* white, terror-stricken countenance stood more clearly before her than all the others, for it was that of her son! She saw his breast heave with agony, his lips tremble with woe, and in the extremity of his fear he cried out, 'Mother, mother, save me!'

No sooner were the words uttered than there stood by the boy an angel—an angel dressed in the rough garb of a sailor, but with the light of heaven on his face. He drew Ben up from the deck, and as they rose into the air the ship struck the rocks and went down.

She saw the angel smile on Ben as they disappeared among the clouds, and in a transport of joy she cried out, 'He is saved! he is saved!' and then awoke to know that it was *only a dream*.





CHAPTER IX.

UNPLEASANT COMPANIONS.

WE left Ben Hanson in a lethargic sleep among the cargo of the *Dolphin*. He would have slept there until death found him, if something had not happened to rouse him into activity of mind again.

The ship was far out on the ocean, running before a fine breeze. It was bright morning, though Ben did not know it, and Jim was growing uneasy, for he thought it was more than time that Ben showed himself to the ship's company. He thought Ben must be having an unpleasant berth below, and must be hungry besides; but he dared not say a word about the stowaway, and had no excuse for removing the hatch which covered Ben's retreat.

‘Why doesn’t the chap bawl out, or do something?’ thought Jim. ‘I hope he hasn’t been suffocated,—there was an awful smell down there,—or been eaten by rats. Ugh!’

But though Jim had such horrid fears regarding poor Ben, he did not see that he had any business to tell that a fellow-mortal was perhaps dying down in the hold, for, if he did speak, he would have to acknowledge his own share in the matter, and be chastised accordingly. The captain was a kind, good man, but strict, as all captains ought to be; and the cabin-boy was a bad boy, consequently he feared the captain.

Jim fidgeted around the closed hatchway, and listened for sounds from below, but held his tongue.

And Ben slept on,—if sleep his state could be called,—until a sharp pain in his hand recalled him to consciousness. He opened his eyes, but of course saw nothing, and could not remember for some time where he was, so lay quite still, striving to collect his senses.

These were speedily sharpened by another dagger (as he thought) being thrust into his numb hand. With a low cry of pain he lifted the hand to his face, and felt blood flowing from the wounds. ‘I must have struck it on a nail,’ he thought; ‘and yet I do not think I moved.’ It was a sore wound,

however it came there, and the pain of it quickened Ben's wits. He wrapped the hand in the front of his jacket, and began to ponder on the distressing situation in which he had placed himself. What was to be done? How was he to get out of his present position? Surely the cabin-boy would try to communicate with him, or would tell the men that there was a stowaway on board, and they would come to his relief. But suppose he *had* told, and the captain had refused to stir one step to release him.

Ben had heard of captains doing more cruel deeds than that. He had heard that they were generally severe in their treatment of runaways. Every atrocity which had been committed at sea that Ben had ever heard of came crowding back to his memory at that moment. Then, too late, he remembered that his absence must have caused bitter anguish at home; that his mother could not know where he was, and would break her heart in imagining him exposed to all kinds of danger.

Never did boy suffer more intensely for one false step taken than Ben Hanson did at that time. He was in the clutches of that Tempter which had led him into the fatal path of sin, and utter despair silenced even the voice of conscience.

Thus he lay, in mute torment, until a stealthy

movement near caused him to open his eyes again. Looking up, he saw on the hogshead above two gleaming eyes peering down at him through the darkness. Two! surely fear was multiplying the vision, and he was being cheated by his fancy, for it could not be that all those gleaming orbs overhead were living eyes! The hogshead seemed covered with them,—rows of them,—and they were all directed at him.

Cold dew came out on Ben's forehead, and every muscle seemed numbed by terror. He could not move. But just then a keen tooth stuck into an uncovered portion of his ankle explained the meaning of those glaring eyes. He was surrounded—attacked by rats! Horror of horrors! He would be eaten alive by savage vermin, down in that dark and pestilential hold.

Wildly the boy's shrieks rang forth, and at the sound his assailants scurried away; but in doing so, some in their hurry jumped on him and over him, and he thought they were beginning their dreadful meal. Shriek followed on shriek, until, beside himself with terror, poor Ben swooned away.

When his first cry was heard on deck, the men were awestruck, for, superstitious as most sailors are, they believed it to be an unearthly voice. But as the screams continued, the captain

came up from his cabin and inquired what was the matter.

One man shook his head, and another pointed to the hatchway.

'A spirret,' muttered one tar. 'A bad omen,' said another.

Jim, white and trembling, gasped, 'It's a boy.'

'Yes,' said the captain; 'it's a stowaway. Remove that hatch, men. Look alive!'

By that time the men had recovered themselves, and could recognize in the screams the voice of a human being. Right willingly they opened the hatch, and down went the captain among the cargo in search of the boy or man whom he never doubted was there.

'Where are you, man? Speak!' he called out, for he could not see any one, and he could not crawl, as Ben had done, among the casks. But no voice replied, for by that time Ben was unconscious.

Captain Telfer shouted for Jim to come down with a light, and in much trepidation the cabin-boy obeyed. Then the captain, swinging the lantern about, and peering into corners, told Jim to creep along a short way and see if he could find any one. Not daring to refuse, and well knowing that he *would* find some one, Jim went, and soon came upon poor Ben, lying senseless under the big hogshead.

It was with infinite difficulty that the boy was dragged from his hiding-place, but at last the men managed to make a way for themselves, and the poor stowaway was lifted more dead than alive into the open air.





CHAPTER X.

THE 'DOLPHIN' IN STRAITS.

DABBLED with his own blood, covered with the dust and filth among which he had been grovelling, unconscious of all around, Ben Hanson did not look much like the well-dressed boy who had so lately been under a careful, tender mother's supervision.

He was laid on the deck, and cold water dashed upon his face. His chest and hands were bathed in brandy, and everything Captain Telfer could think of done to restore him to animation; but it was a long time before he showed signs of life.

At last he opened his eyes to the light of day once more, and met, little as he had deserved it, only kind looks and gentle words. But Ben was incapable of appreciating any kindness just then, for, with the dawn of returning consciousness, there came to him a thought of his deserted home, and

his mother's face as it had looked when he turned from her door for the last time.

'Oh, mother! mother! mother!' moaned the boy; and at his words some of the frank, bold sailors turned away in tears, for powerful is that most sweet name to stir the fountains of feeling in men's breasts.

'Ay, you've caused her trouble, my boy,' said Captain Telfer kindly; 'but it is never too late to mend; so cheer up, and we will set you all right again.'

But Ben could not be consoled, and still continued to wail on his mother in such heart-broken accents, that at last a stalwart tar exclaimed, 'It ain't any good trying to stop him. He must be fed and made to turn in; after that the crying will work its own cure, and, if I mistake not, do the lad's heart a deal o' good.' Then, stooping over Ben, the speaker lifted him in his arms and conveyed him to a snug berth below—very different from the one Ben had chosen for himself.

After the men had fed and washed him, they left the stowaway to his tears, which did his heart good, as his big friend had predicted. All the self-will, the disobedience, the foolish desires of the past, were crushed out of Ben then. He saw his error and deplored it; but, alas! it could not be undone.

The *Dolphin* was far away from Scotland by that time, and he had no means of even sending a letter to implore forgiveness—no means of relieving his mother's anxiety in any way whatever.

It was many days before Ben gained sufficient command of himself to cease from crying, and acknowledge gratefully the attention which was bestowed upon him.

All that time the cabin-boy kept aloof. He had no sympathy with Ben's remorse, and was very much afraid that he would inform upon the person who had connived at his misdemeanour, so Jim determined that he would deny all knowledge of Ben until he saw how the fit of repentance terminated. But the steward remembered that Jim had come to him for food to give a 'chap' on the day the vessel left Leith ; and when cross-questioned, Jim admitted that the stowaway was like that 'chap.' It was taken for granted that the boy had hid himself while Jim was with the steward, so no more questions were asked, and the cabin-boy escaped at that time.

Before Ben was well enough to come on deck or converse much, the *Dolphin* was overtaken by a heavy storm, which drove her out of her course ; and the attention of all on board was too fully occupied with the exigencies of the hour to be turned to Ben.

Day after day the storm continued ; sometimes less, sometimes more, but always wild enough to keep the men painfully on the alert ; and then Ben Hanson learned that a sailor's life is not all fun and jollity. He tried to crawl on deck once or twice, but found that he could not keep a footing on the wave-washed planks, and was obliged to retreat below again. Whenever any of the men came near, he read in their faces that the position of the ship must be critical, for they spoke little, and every countenance wore a haggard, anxious expression.

Thus the days went on, and the *Dolphin*, much battered, continued to struggle successfully with wind and wave. But the crew were greatly exhausted, and their vessel had not only received much damage, but had been driven back a long way, so Captain Telfer decided to put into the nearest Norwegian port. Accordingly, every effort was made to guide the *Dolphin* to a safe refuge ; but, as if the Fates had conspired against her, a fresh gale sprang up, and drove her *on* as much as before she had been driven *back*. And then the danger to be feared was a greater one than that which beset the barque when she was being carried out into a wide, wide ocean ; for before her lay a rocky lee-shore, and if she failed to make a harbour she must be dashed to pieces before long.

An anxious watch was kept, and everything done

that human skill could devise, but the ship was partially disabled, and would not obey her helm.

She had been out from Leith about a month when that which the men had feared came to pass. During the darkness of night and tempest, the ominous roar of wild, resistless waves dashing upon the rocks was heard, and then rang the awful cry of 'Breakers ahead !'





CHAPTER XI.

THE VALUE OF A LIFE-BELT.

THE *Dolphin's* vicinity to the rocks was made known to her crew one moment, and the next she struck; and then the captain, seeing that all hope of saving the ship must be abandoned, ordered the boats to be lowered. But some had been dashed to pieces when the vessel struck the rocks, and some had been washed away, so that only one boat was safely launched. While the men were getting into her, a great wave broke alongside, the cable which held the boat was detached, and she drifted away from the *Dolphin* in a few moments.

Captain Telfer looked aghast, as he saw the sole chance, as it seemed, of safety left thus taken from himself and a number of his crew. He was a young man in the prime of his days, and he had a wife and

two little children at home. Little wonder that his heart sank for one moment as he saw the lifeboat carried to a distance.

But the moon, coming out just then, showed the land not far away, and there was a possibility of reaching it by the aid of spars lashed to the person, or life-belts, if the ship would only hold together long enough to allow the men to use such means of self-preservation.

'Each man for himself *now*,' shouted the captain, and at his words the crew seized upon life-belts and such-like. One of the men secured a belt for his captain also, and each one was soon rigged (as he thought best) for the terrible struggle before him. No time was to be lost, for each wave that struck the barque made wider gaps in her battered timbers, and threatened to crush her into fragments any instant.

'There is nothing for it but to go over the side, and commit yourselves to Providence,' said Captain Telfer, seeing the men hesitate to leave the wreck. It was not wonderful that they hung back from plunging into the seething, swift, and all-powerful ocean, for there might be many more rocks between them and the shore against which they would be dashed to death.

'Make haste, my men,' urged the captain ; '*I* must not go till the last one of you has left.' As he

spoke, he buckled tight his life-belt and stood ready to spring into the turbulent water.

Just then, a gigantic billow lifted the barque and dashed her upon another crag. She parted with a mighty crash, and one portion disappeared among the waves. The men, who were all fortunately on the other part of the ship, seeing what must happen, hesitated no longer, but went over the side one after another.

Captain Telfer stood by encouraging them, and waiting to go also as soon as the last of his brave crew had left the wreck. 'Any more?' he asked, and glanced round.

The crew had all gone, but the captain's eye fell upon the stowaway, crouching near in abject terror. Ben had crept on deck when the vessel struck, but all had been too painfully occupied since then to give any attention to *him*, and when the life-belts were seized upon, no one dreamed of offering one to Ben. 'Every man for himself,' the captain had said, and the men no doubt thought (if they gave the matter a thought at all) that the boy could look after himself as well as they could.

A child's overwhelming dread of danger, despair, and wild entreaty were blended in Ben's expression, as he met the captain's eye. Indeed, the boy was beside himself with fear, and from his white lips burst the cry, 'Mother! mother! Save me!'

Captain Telfer was, as I said, young, and in the full enjoyment of the strong manhood which God had bestowed upon him. He had everything to make life worth living, worth struggling to keep. Yet, as he looked at Ben, his generous soul forgot itself. One swift thought flew to the baby boys he had left at home, and his heart cried out to God, 'In *their* hour of peril, oh, may some true man hold out a hand to *them* !'

'Haven't you got a belt, boy?' he asked of Ben. No ; Ben had not secured any means of buoying himself up, and the renewed groaning under their feet told them that the remnant of the *Dolphin* would be driftwood before many minutes.

'I can swim a little,' said the captain, yet knowing, as he said it, that swimming was of little use in such a strait.

With calm promptitude he unfastened the life-belt which a few minutes before he had fastened on himself, and girt it about the trembling stowaway. He was careful to tie it so that it should not be displaced easily ; and, as he did so, he spoke words of cheer to Ben, words which Ben remembered afterwards, though at the time he was too bewildered to give them much heed. Then said this devoted sea-king, 'Now, over with you, and be a good son to your mother. Don't be frightened, and think sometimes of me.'

He helped Ben over the side, and then a roaring billow rolled over the wreck, sweeping captain and stowaway into the surf. To attempt to swim in such circumstances was simply impossible. The only thing that any man could do was to trust to whatever support he had been lucky enough to secure, and to let the sea carry him where it would. Ben flung up his hands, and felt that he was drowning, but the life-belt sustained him, and he found that he was being swiftly carried towards the shore. But the waves dashing over him soon overpowered his senses, and he did not know when he was tossed upon the beach, and kind hands lifted him beyond the reach of the sea.





CHAPTER XII.

IN MEMORIAM.

IF I had *invented* the incidents above recorded, I think I would have said that the noble captain of the *Dolphin* was saved as well as Ben ; but I am telling you true incidents, and therefore it only remains for me to tell the end of that generous man in the words of a newspaper which recorded the story at the time it happened :—

‘Over the side went the stowaway, lifted upon the surf like a cork ; over the side went the captain, trusting, like the good, brave fellow that he was, to his strength, enfeebled with long watching and anxiety.

‘But swimming was impossible in such a sea, and the captain went down, never to be seen again ; while the little stowaway, with the good captain’s belt about his waist, was flung upon the coast, battered

about, but alive to tell the story of his strange fate and his kind friend's heroism.

'The moral of such a story is contained in its recital. Words would be wasted in saying more of the perfect humanity and fearlessness of a man who gave up his best chance of life without hesitation for one of the "least of those little ones," who stood helpless by his side, when man and boy were in the immediate presence of death. That captain, unlashng his life-belt—with two miles of white water between himself and the shore—to tie it upon the little rascal who had stolen a passage with him, is a figure which tells us with new and noble force that manhood is stronger than storm, and love mightier than death.'





CHAPTER XIII.

A LETTER.

MRS. HANSON'S dream of Ben (as you will have seen) happened at the very time that he was in such peril, and we have no difficulty in recognizing his good angel in the gallant captain who gave his life for the boy.

Shortly after that time the poor mother was laid completely aside, and, feeling her end drawing near, was filled with anxiety regarding the twins.

She had few near relatives, and none on this side the Atlantic who were in a position to take charge of her children. It was hard to leave them so unprotected, but she trusted in the promises of God, and after much prayer was enabled to cast her burden on the Friend who never fails the widow and orphan.

She told the girls that she was afraid she would have to leave them soon, but that they must trust

in God, and He would bring Ben to them, 'and then you must tell him how freely I forgave him, and how I left my blessing for him, feeling *sure* that he would yet fulfil his promise to his father, and would some day meet me in heaven.'

Thus the Christian mother spoke, with a sure hope that her prayers would be answered.

'I wonder,' said Cassie afterwards to Bella,—'I wonder why mother does not write to Uncle John again. Surely he would be kind to her now that she is so ill, and would maybe take care of us afterwards.'

'Oh, that is no use!' replied Bella. 'She wrote when dear father died, and uncle never answered the letter.'

'Perhaps he never got it.'

'Yes; for mother said she knew she had the proper address, for she got it from a gentleman here with whom he does business, and that gentleman told her that Uncle John had married a very proud lady. So, even if he wished to write to mother, his proud wife might hinder him.'

'Yet,' persisted gentle Cassie, who had ideas of her own sometimes, 'I am sure if he knew what we know about dear mother, he would come to her, or do something. Can you fancy one of us dying, and Ben knowing it and yet staying away, Bella?'

No; badly as Ben had behaved, Bella could not

believe that he would be so callous as that. 'I think,' she said, 'if *we* were to write to Uncle John, he would reply.'

So the good little souls begged for their uncle's address, and when their mother told them that they must not be too hopeful of receiving a reply, they shook their bright heads and said, 'We won't *count* upon it, but we will pray for it, and it will come.'

Mrs. Hanson thought that perhaps God had put it into their hearts to write, so she did not ask to see the letter they sent, but she could not help following it with many fervent prayers.

You would like to hear what the twins said to their unknown uncle, so here is their letter :—

'DEAR UNCLE JOHN,—We are quite sure that you will be sorry that dear dear mother is dying. She became very ill quite lately, and we think that was because Ben (Ben is our one brother) ran away to sea, and she does not know where he is. She is very sad at thought of leaving us alone. But we do not mind that so much, if only she did not have to go. But we think she will be glad to see father again, and God will take care of us. Only, dear Uncle John, we would so like if you would write to her. She does love you so, and often speaks of when you and she were little and alone together in

the world. Won't you write and tell her that you have not forgotten her? She does not know we are writing to you, but we shall have to tell her, because we do not know your address. Dear Uncle John, you would make us all *so* happy if you would write to mother.—We are, your affectionate nieces, the twins,

‘BELLA AND CASSIE.’

Mr. Sutherland had lately lost his wife and son, and his heart was stricken within him. The voice of conscience, stifled through long years, was making itself heard when the letter which his little nieces had written reached him; and it was an appeal which his softened feelings could not resist. Before it came he felt alone in the world, bereft of all that made life and wealth of any value. *Now* he knew that God had directed the children when writing to him, and right willingly did he respond to that call of the artless little ones.

Fearing to delay, lest he might not be in time to see his sister, Mr. Sutherland would not write to her, but hurriedly transferred himself to the first swift steamer leaving New York for England. And as he sped back to the land of his nativity, one by one the old tender associations of home and kindred came crowding back. He saw again the little timid sister

who had clung to him so trustingly, who had so often screened him from punishment, who had loved him notwithstanding the neglect of a lifetime, and his soul, smitten by remorse, cried earnestly, 'Oh that I may not be too late!'





CHAPTER XIV.

UNCLE JOHN.

BELLA and Cassie were returning home from school one afternoon. They were talking of their letter, and wondering what Uncle John would say in reply. They never doubted that he would reply. 'He *couldn't* do anything else,' they affirmed, although their mother said that she feared he would treat their letter as he had done hers. But the twins had the strong faith of children, and in this matter they persisted in differing from their mother.

On the particular afternoon to which I allude they were wondering when the expected answer would come; and as they reached their own garden gate they saw a gentleman going up to the door. They had never seen him before, but as soon as he perceived the girls coming up to the door he paused

before ringing the bell, and asked if they were Mrs. Hanson's little girls.

'Yes,' said Bella.

'Is your mother at home?' was the next question, to which the twins answered 'Yes' again.

By that time the servant had opened the door, and the little women, never doubting that the stranger was 'an honest person and a gentleman,' invited him to walk in. 'Mother is in bed,' Bella told him as she led the way up-stairs, 'but if you will tell us what you want and who you are, we will be glad to take a message to her.'

The gentleman patted the little heads kindly, and asked how long their mother had been in bed.

'Not long,' they answered; and then an instinctive sense of the proprieties stopped them from adding how ill she was, and the reason that had hastened the progress of her disease. They stood eyeing the stranger a little curiously; and he stood looking at them. He seemed to be considering a knotty point, for he was quite silent and kept his hands upon their shoulders as if he wished to detain them there until he had settled some matter in his own mind.

At last he stooped and kissed the twins, and asked in a low voice if their mother was too ill to see any one, or to be told good news.

'Oh no!' exclaimed Bella; and Cassie eagerly asked, 'Have you brought news of Ben?'

‘No, my dear. I do not know anything of your brother, but I know something of another runaway. Will you tell your mother that some one from America who knows her brother John wishes to see her—some one who has brought a message from him. But first, my dears, I must tell you that this some one has seen a letter which two good little girls wrote not long ago. But I will tell you all about that and what Uncle John thought and did afterwards. Just now, please, take my message to your mother.’

Off they ran at once, and told their mother what the stranger had said.

‘From John! oh, bring him here*at once!’ Mrs. Hanson exclaimed; and, led by the twins, Mr. Sutherland was speedily ushered into the sick-room.

His face was very pale and there were tears in his eyes, but he said never a word. He walked up to the bedside and looked down upon the worn face, on which the stamp of death was set. Could that weary woman be his blithe young sister, whose beauty and vivacity had won so much admiration even when she was a child no older than her twins? Mr. Sutherland was struck dumb, for the picture in his mind was so different from the one before him.

‘You come from my brother John,’ Mrs. Hanson murmured,—‘John, who left me when we were chil-

dren. Oh, tell me of him,—my only and dear brother!’

The stranger dropped on his knees and laid his face in her wasted hands as he faltered, ‘I am that brother, Janet.’

It would not be possible to tell what joy her brother’s return gave to Mrs. Hanson. It was like receiving one back from the dead, and though it was difficult to recognize in the middle-aged, world-weary man the mischievous light-hearted boy who had been her childhood’s companion, yet ‘blood is thicker than water,’ and all the old love was ready to flow out to him who, though so much changed, was yet *brother John*.

As for the twins, no words could tell their delight. They fairly danced with delight, and were never done caressing their uncle, who seemed to them the most delightful person of their acquaintance.

He had brought them numerous presents, and every time he went out he brought in more. But I think what made them love him most was the way he talked of their dear mother when she was a little girl. He never tired of that theme, nor did they. He would describe the games which he and his sister were wont to play, and the songs they sang together, the books they read, the lanes they walked along, and the twins listened with eager delight.

Uncle John’s arrival took from Mrs. Hanson all

anxiety regarding the future of her children, and she thankfully resigned herself to what seemed likely to happen before long. Life had been full of sorrow to her, and it was not wonderful that she had anchored her best hopes in the future existence.

Again and again she would tell the twins to assure Ben (if he failed to return before her death) that everything had been ordered *for the best*, seeing that Uncle John would have to return to New York, and he could not have taken the girls with him if their mother had still been lingering in feeble health. She could not undertake such a voyage, so it was better, she assured them, that her rest should come speedily. Yet she hoped that a letter, at least, would come from her boy before she went; but no letter came, no word of Ben, and Mrs. Hanson's patience and faith were sorely tried.





CHAPTER XV.

NEWS FROM A FAR COUNTRY.

THE *Dolphin* had been wrecked on the coast of Norway, which, as you know, is not a remote country. Nevertheless, it took a long time to bring the shipwrecked men back to their native land, or even in communication with it. They did not understand the language of the hospitable people among which they had been cast, and the Norwegians did not speak English; but there is a language which all nations understand—the language which suffering humanity expresses by its gestures; and the descendants of the old Sea-rovers were not slack in responding to the appeal which the sad condition of the castaways made.

Some of the men were much hurt, others had been lost with their gallant captain, and among that

number was Jim the cabin-boy. Sadly unprepared, I fear, was he for the awful fate he met so suddenly.

The greater number of the crew, as soon as they were refreshed enough to proceed, set out for the nearest town under the guidance of the natives, who were most willing to render every assistance in their power.

The injured men were left to follow when able, but their comrades carried tidings of them to their friends. Some were so ill that they were not able even to send messages, and Ben was among that number.

Fortunately for his friends, however, the big sailor who had nursed Ben so kindly on board ship had questioned him about his home, and knew where to go with tidings. Some weeks later the man presented himself at Mrs. Hanson's door, and, you may be sure, received a warm welcome when his errand was announced. The pale mother listened in tearful silence to the story of Ben's adventures, and her heart went up in grateful thanks to God for his safety and his repentance. 'I tell ye, the boy was real sorry for what he had done,' said the large-bodied, tender-hearted tar, 'and I'm thinking he will
over and come back to ask your pardon,
keep up your heart, for though he is main
resent, he is like to come through it in time.

Indeed, I expect he is all right *now*, for it is weeks since I left him.'

'Would it be of any use to write to him?' asked Uncle John; and the man replied, 'It could do no harm to send a letter, but I'm thinking the boy will be on his way home now. And glad he will be, poor chap, to sit down by his mother's fireside again. He has had a rough time of it, but the lesson has done him good.'

Letters were at once despatched to Ben, but by some unlucky circumstance they were carried to another part of Norway from where he was, and he did not receive them.

For many weeks he lay struggling for his life, and, but for the kindly nursing he received, the boy must have succumbed to the injuries he had suffered, as well as the shock to his nervous system.

When he was recovered enough to take interest in the world again, and to ask questions, he found that all the survivors from the *Dolphin* had left, and he was alone in a foreign land.

The first thing Ben did as soon as he was able to hold a pen in his thin, shaking fingers, was to write a letter to his mother—a letter badly spelt, full of grammatical errors, the lines all running off at the corner, the words blotted, the sentences undivided and incoherent. A genuine ship-boy's letter, but oh, how precious to Mrs. Hanson and the twins!

They could wait patiently after that, and his mother could even be content to leave without seeing him, so thankful was she for his life preserved, and for that missive full of boyish contrition and promises of amendment.

They wondered that Ben did not acknowledge receipt of their letters, but *that* was a trifle to think about. What did such a small thing matter? what did anything matter in comparison with the joyful fact that Ben would soon be well, would soon be home again? All minor things were lost sight of in presence of that fact.

Fortunately for Ben, he had become so friendly with his benefactors by the time he was convalescent that he did not feel his isolation so much as he might otherwise have done. The good villagers were unremitting in their kindness, and, knowing nothing of his history, treated him as they would have done a more deserving boy.

During those days Ben had plenty of time for reflection, and many were the resolutions he made to amend his ways. Many times did he vow to himself never to disobey his teachers again, never to grieve his good mother any more.

I wish all the boys I have heard about who make good resolutions when they are laid aside by sickness would remember their vows when they return to the business of life, as Ben Hanson did, and, like him,

make amends for the pain they have given to others, as well as for their misspent time and opportunities. A poet says that 'hell is paved with good intentions.' I wish our boys would recollect more than they do that *desiring* to do right and *doing* it are two very, very different things.





CHAPTER XVI.

GOING HOME.

WHEN Ben's recovery was assured, the kind people among whom he had been cast gave him clothes and money and sent him to the nearest seaport, where, in all probability, he would find an English vessel to take him home.

I will not weary you with the story of his subsequent adventures before he met countrymen of his own, and a ship homeward bound. You have heard of such incidents often enough, for the hardships he endured and the troubles he passed through were just such as many a castaway has suffered before, and many a story-teller has repeated. He got into scrapes, partly through his own ignorance and partly through his want of knowledge of the language and habits of the people with whom he came in contact.

After months of varied experiences, Ben Hanson

found himself once more on Scottish seas. He was working his way back as a cabin-boy on board a swift steamer. The crew were a fine set of men, good-tempered and kindly, and Ben had confessed enough of his story to elicit some sympathy and much forbearance from them all.

How different was his coming home to the going away from it! and yet in many respects he had been far more fortunate than many a stowaway.

With what gratitude did he remember all Captain Telfer's kindness, and that final deed of heroism which had been the means of sparing Ben to return to mother and home repentant!

What a light had been shed upon the character of his chosen companion Jack Wilson! *Now* Ben saw how wise had been his mother's injunction to him regarding his choice of friends.

'I have had a taste of salt water,' thought Ben, 'and I don't want any more of it. I was a fool to believe that it was all smooth sailing at sea—a fool to trust to a boy's judgment, rather than to that of my mother, who was only thinking of my good—if I had but seen it.'

Then he wondered how the twins had got on without him, and what they would say when he returned—not brown and saucy, with blue jacket and round sailor's hat, but worn with sickness and depressed in spirit by his own self-accusations.

Oh, we can understand something of the boy's feelings when the Bell Rock Lighthouse met his eye—when Isle of May and Inchkeith came into view—when the Firth of Forth, winding grandly among the rich and pleasant lands of its delta, opened on his sight—when the hills of fair Edinburgh, and its graceful spires, rose before his vision—when, finally, he found his feet planted upon his native soil, and the old familiar scenes surrounding him !

Remembering *how* Ben had left his home, you will not wonder that on returning to it he shed many tears and trembled with emotion, but the eager longing to be clasped to his mother's heart overcame every other sensation.

He never doubted—did ever boy doubt?—how that mother would welcome her prodigal. A father or brother may close his door on the truant, but *a mother* never.

He would be received with open arms, Ben knew, if—ah ! he would not let the shadow of fear cross his mind.

With wild haste he hurried along the well-known streets and roads until he reached the home where he was born and where his childhood had been spent ; where he had received a solemn and most precious charge, to which he had been faithless ; where he had played with his young sisters ; where he had seen his father die ; where his fond mother

had watched over him, forgiving and loving him, and dealing most patiently with all his rebellious fancies.

Her gentle, reproachful, pleading eyes, as he had last seen them, seemed to have gone before Ben all the way home, and he had said to himself, 'I will never grieve her more—never! oh, how good I will be to her *now!*'

And then he reached his old home and laid his hand upon the garden gate. As he did so he looked towards the dining-room window, where his mother had stood when he went away, and where he almost expected to see her stand at that moment, and as he glanced up his heart leapt to think how her sorrowful face would lighten at sight of him.

The windows were closed, the shutters barred across them, and a notice 'To Let' was over the front door!





CHAPTER XVII.

LIFE'S LESSON LEARNED.

I HAVE seen a youth stand, as Ben Hanson stood, before his deserted home, and I pray I may never again look upon such a face of agony as that was.

I dare not attempt to describe how the boy felt. I would only ask you, boys, who read this 'ower true tale,' if you are ever tempted to take such a step as Ben took when he ran away from home, to think *in time* of his return home. I tell you, not all the pleasure that the wide world can give through a long lifetime will take one drop from the bitterness of such a moment.

Ben clung to the closed gate, gazing wildly at the silent house, and crying aloud. The attention of a neighbour was attracted, and she recognized him at once. Going out to him, the lady said kindly, 'Come in here, Ben, and I will tell you all that has happened.'

'Mother, my mother! where is mother?' he cried, beside himself with anguish.

'Come, Ben,' urged the lady, in tears,—'come into my house, and let me tell you how peacefully she died.'

But he broke from the friendly hand, and, running at headlong pace from street to street, he paused not until he was standing by his father's grave.

There was a new grave close beside it, and a second name on the headstone, and, in extremity of pain and remorse, the boy fell upon his face and passionately kissed the turf which covered the bosom that had been his cradle and his rest.

'Never to see her more! never to tell her how sorry I am! never to be loved, and welcomed, and forgiven! Oh, mother! mother!'

But then, when he was so low, the Comforter whispered to Ben, 'Loved, welcomed, and forgiven! You can find her in your Father's house. She is smiling on you from the better Home;' and at that thought he ceased to despair. But still he bowed on her grave and wept. Kindly people passing the spot stopped and tried to comfort him, but all in vain. He would not speak of his grief, and he would not be persuaded to leave the place.

At last there chanced to pass that way one who knew Ben Hanson well; one whose heart was ever open to boys, good and bad; one who would have

helped Ben if Ben would have let him—even his kind master, Dr. Ogilvie.

The sight of a boy prostrate and trembling beside a grave was something to stir the Doctor's deepest feelings, and his first impulse was to offer comfort to the laddie. He stepped nearer and recognized Ben, although his face was almost hidden.

Dr. Ogilvie did not utter any exclamation of surprise at finding the poor runaway there. He spoke no word of stern rebuke for the wrong Ben had done, no reminder of pain, nothing to lacerate the wounded soul.

The man of quick and generous instincts knew exactly what to say, and he said it.

'Ben Hanson,' spoke the kind, grave voice of his master, '*she* bade us tell you that she blessed and forgave you, and hoped to meet you again. Be your mother's son, my boy, and take what God sends with patient courage.'

Those words gave Ben strength at once, and he turned to stand penitent and heart-broken before the Doctor.

His hands were at once taken into the firm clasp of the friend whom God had sent to him, and again the Doctor spoke :

'Be glad for her, Ben, as she is glad for you to-day. Now come with me, and I will tell you where to find your sisters. How pleased the

little things will be to see you! They need *you*, though they have found their uncle.'

With Ben's hand in his, Dr. Ogilvie led the boy away, never waiting for him to speak, but talking on about the twins, and Uncle John, and the happiness which had come to Mrs. Hanson through her brother's return. They reached the Doctor's house, and Ben was most tenderly cared for. After a time he was composed enough to hear of his mother's last days and last words.

Mr. Sutherland had thought that if Ben came back he might seek Dr. Ogilvie, and messages had been left with him, as well as with the Wilsons and other neighbours to whom the boy was likely to apply for information.

'You are to follow your uncle to New York as soon as possible, and there you will find your sisters, who have been adopted by him,' Ben was told, after all else had been revealed, and his affection for the girls stimulated to rouse him from the dejection which the loss of his mother had caused.

Until arrangements were made for his departure, Ben remained with his generous master, and in those days a bond was formed between them which not the world and not death could break.

There was one duty which Ben felt he had to perform before going to his sisters. The death of

Captain Telfer had of course been reported by the crew, but only Ben knew *how* the noble sailor had lost his life, and he longed to express what he felt about it.

He sought the captain's widow and told her how her husband had sacrificed himself for another ; and Ben, with many tears, asked her if she could forgive him for what he had so unintentionally done. Mrs. Telfer answered, as the wife of such a hero should, 'I have nothing to forgive. He only obeyed *his* Captain's injunction, and has received, I cannot doubt, the guerdon which Christ gives to every faithful servant.'

Then she told Ben that she hoped he would grow to be as brave and good a man as the one who gave his life for him had been. And she lived to see that hope fulfilled. In after years Captain Telfer's boys had no friend so true as Ben Hanson, and by many a kindness done to them and their mother did he prove how lasting was his gratitude.

There was a happy meeting between the twins and Ben, though the shadow of their recent bereavement chastened their gladness. For a long time they could talk of nothing but their mother and her parting words.

Afterwards, when Ben had set to the duties of life once more, he spoke less of her, but the keenness of pain for her loss remained with him the more

because of the silence he maintained regarding her. In his heart he cherished her memory, with all her sweet, forgiving words, and evermore he vowed to obey her last request, which was to meet her in heaven, where all the mistakes of earth are set right, and all the broken ties of this life are reunited for evermore.



THE HERIOT BOY.



THE HERIOT BOY.



SUNSHINE was lighting up a little room in the Old Town of Edinburgh. Thank God, there are few homes in that city where the sunlight cannot penetrate, and none where the inhabitants are beyond the reach of pure air or green grass. The uncompromising rocks seemed piled in all and unexpected directions, as if for

the sole purpose of shortening streets, widening roads, and compelling Art to take Nature by the hand and keep pace with her, instead of stumbling forwards at a blind and headlong run. Thus, if the poor man's house be in a dark close, or up a 'stuffy stair,' he has only to walk towards any point of the compass that suits his fancy, and he must encounter the blessed face of nature in less than ten minutes.

The sunshine seemed to have a special mission for the room I am writing about. An invalid was there, stooping over one of those delicate blocks of wood used by engravers, and trying his hardest to fix upon it the copy of a drawing before him. Once he looked up at the window with an impatient gesture, as if the light were giving its help grudgingly. But presently he laid down his graver with a weary sigh, and said,—

‘It isn't a bit of use, Meg; the light is glowing through the room, I feel, yet it seems as if a London fog were between me and the picture.’

‘I'm so sorry, father. Rest a bit. The doctor will be here soon, and we will hear what he advises.’

‘He may not come to-day,’ querulously replied the sick man.

‘Oh, but I am sure he will; I always have a presentiment of his coming,’ said the girl merrily.

She was a great contrast to her sad, ailing parent. I do not mean that Maggie Fenwick was a beauty,

or anything more than a rosy, bright Scotch lassie; but being that, she had an attraction beyond any of mere features. She was not more than sixteen years of age, but a certain self-reliant, 'settled' expression of countenance made her look some years older.

There was a third person in the room, if I may speak of a small boy of nine as a person. He was very beautiful, but it was that refined, fragile loveliness which we grieve to see in a humble dwelling, for we know how surely the delicate organization of both mind and body will fail before the rude touch of poverty. The boy was engrossed with his paint-brush, and the bold outline of Arthur's Seat was being reproduced by his small fingers with marvellous power. The way he raised his large, thoughtful eyes again and again to gaze upon the noble scene before him, showed that a true artist's soul dwelt in his breast. The sunlight had not failed in its mission as far as Jim was concerned, and he could entirely appreciate the exquisite beauty of the golden glory cast so profusely upon the grand old hill, and upon his dingy home. Maggie looked admiringly at the pretty picture made by the child and the sunbeams, and tried to wile her father from his melancholy mood by talking of Jim's evident genius, but the shadow lay upon the sick man's heart until an hour later, when a quiet, steady step on the common stair,

and a sharp, firm ring at the bell, verified Maggie's prediction that the doctor would come.

One could see in a moment that he was the friend as well as the physician. He patted Maggie's shoulder, stroked Jim's hair, took his patient's hand—not to shake, but to hold during his visit in a kind, sympathetic way. He did not ask many questions; the doctor can see better than hear. But he let Fenwick talk about his ailments as much as he pleased—if it did not help to cure him, it at least eased his mental pain. The smile which once or twice lit up the doctor's thoughtful face betokened his interested feelings, and, although his words were few, and he looked as if the sufferings of his patients had been carried in his kindly heart until they had left a certain solemnity upon his face, his short visit did a world of good in that small, dull chamber.

Maggie followed him from the room into her little parlour; the doctor knew why, and therefore spared her the pain of questioning him.

'It is as I feared, my poor child; you must be light and sight to him now.'

'Will he be quite blind—quite blind?' she sobbed.

'Yes, Maggie; and you are to be his hope and support; he has none else.'

She dried her tears at once, while the doctor sat down and drew her to his side.

'I want to talk to you,' he said; 'I knew your

mother when she was younger than you, and she would like you to have confidence in me. Now, how do you live, and how are you going to live?’

He was one to be thoroughly trusted, and she told her story frankly enough. Their sole support was the small sum which her father made by wood engraving. He had lately taught her the art, and she earned a little too; ‘but,’ she continued, ‘if he can’t work any longer, and he has not done much for some time, I don’t know what must happen. He was Jim’s teacher, too, but he is not able for that any longer; and then he frets so if the boy’s education falls behind, or if he does not have things as nice as other boys. I might make enough to keep father, but I could not pay for schooling, and clothes, and rent, and, oh dear! such heaps of things.’

Dr. Mackenzie smiled pityingly over the poor girl’s simple perplexities.

‘I have been thinking for you, Maggie,’ he said, ‘knowing how it must be sooner or later. Now you must hear like a brave lassie what I have to say. The accident which deprived your father of the use of his limbs affected his whole system. This blindness is only a token of the evil spreading—you will have to nurse him very tenderly, but not for many years—you will be helped through, you know’ (and the good old man looked upward); ‘but we must relieve you of Jim. He must be educated and

supported until old enough to use his own big brains for his livelihood, for you know as well as I that he could never struggle through unaided, as some rough-made boys do. Will you let me try to get him into Heriot's Hospital?'

'Part Jim from father,' she quickly said; then blushed at her own seeming ingratitude, adding, 'You know how his heart is bound up in Jimmy.'

'Yes, I know, but he has often said that he only dreaded the future because of his boy. He knows you are such a nimble wee woman that you will get on famously, but he had a hard struggle in his own orphan youth, and feels with me that what only strengthened his character will crush this boy outright. I daresay in his present morbid state he will only look at the dark side of the question; but if you put the proposal before him in your own bright way, I feel sure he will see the wisdom of it and consent.'

'You must be right,' Maggie said, as she looked confidently into the doctor's countenance.

Maggie's bright way was this: when her good friend had left her, she went back to her father's room, and began to prattle with Jim about his painting. 'You would like to be a painter, or something in that way, wouldn't you?'

'Oh yes! and I must too,' the boy cried.

'It needs a heap of money to learn for all that,' she said.

Jim looked wistful, and Fenwick sighed.

'The doctor has been talking about Heriot's Hospital,' Maggie went on, 'where the boys are kept and clothed and schooled and everything. Would not that be a fine chance for you, Jimmy?'

'Mary's son brought up by charity!' Fenwick hastily exclaimed.

'Nay, father; but the promise is, "When thy mother and thy father forsake thee, then the Lord will take thee up," and He who said that has told good men to execute this promise for Him. There would be no disgrace, indeed, dear father; you didn't bid the train to run over you, and every one knows you have done all you could for us—'

'Then I am to be blind and quite useless,' the invalid murmured.

'I will help you, dear,' she whispered. Then louder, 'Think of it, father; Jim well cared for and taught everything that a first-rate school teaches, a good home over his head till he is old enough to work for himself and us; or if he is clever and well-conducted (and don't we know he will be both?) he may win a bursary that will give him your dream of a University course.'

'That will do, Meg. What says my boy?'

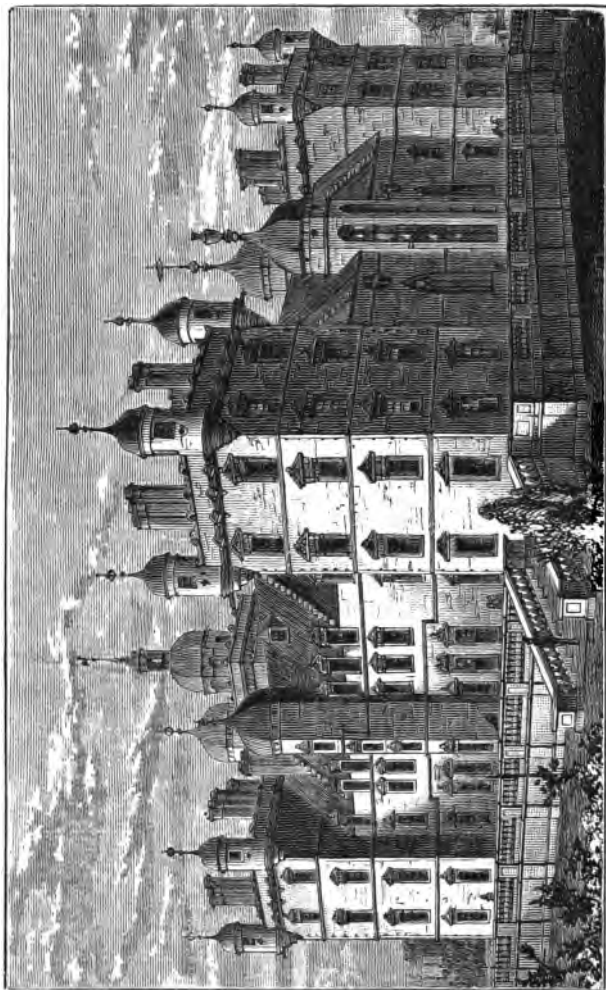
Jim had been listening with pained and eager attention to all Maggie had said, but now that his father addressed him, a deep flush spread over his

delicate features, and he pressed both small hands upon his breast to keep down a tide of feelings such as seldom stir the soul of so young a child.

'I could not do as some very poor boys do,' he faltered. 'I couldn't black shoes and run errands, and—and—oh, father, I don't want to leave you; but some things would kill me!'

'Never fear, Jimmy,' the father said quickly. 'Meg will put it all right, and I'll be content to go when you are safe in Heriot's.'

So it was settled. But there were a good many steps to be taken before the Hospital gates closed between the frail boy and a hard world, and no one knew what agony Fenwick endured while the necessary forms of admission were gone through. The reserved proud nature which came to him by right of Scottish birth could ill brook the investigation into his circumstances past and present—the well-intentioned questionings of town councillors, the examinations by medical officials, by clergymen, by all and sundry who are privileged to have a finger in the pie which George Heriot concocted for the inhabitants of his native city. Doubtless it was, as Dr. Mackenzie said, the morbid state of his nerves which caused Fenwick to suffer as he did in the matter. But there are some people whose health and spirits are not so affected, and yet who can sympathize with such feelings. Maggie did not



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seem to be one of these, however. She carried her blithe face and timid young brother into governors' 'dens,' and electors' offices, and answered every question in a practical, concise way, which proved her good sense.

When all the preliminaries were gone through, and nothing remained to be done but to take Jim to his future home, Maggie stood an unmoved spectator of a very sorrowful parting between father and son. To be sure, Jim was to come home every Saturday, and all holidays; still that could not cover the fact that practically he was leaving home and paternal authority altogether. The parting gift of a dead wife, Jim was a very Benjamin to his father, and the boy's natural attractiveness endeared him still more. But Maggie had seemingly room for no thought but the advantages secured to Jim for all time, and, spite of his tears, she marched him off with an air of the most supreme satisfaction.

It was a cold, drizzly afternoon in February, but not even mud and rain could damp Maggie's spirits, which speedily infused their own brightness into those of the child, and when the brother and sister reached the Hospital, Jim's face was aglow with excitement, curiosity, and pleasure. So entirely did he become engrossed by the strange new surroundings, that he did not observe how Maggie's usually deft fingers bungled while she undid his ribbon and

collar, his shoes and jacket, and dressed him in the uniform suit of Heriot's. Indeed, Jim was vastly proud to exchange his tiny kilt for 'a man's trousers and jacket,' and he supposed that Maggie shared his pleasure—as of course she did, not being sentimental.

Presently the newly-admitted boys were led down to the square, that they might join the troop who were going into the dining-hall. It was quite dusk, and Maggie could only see a confused crowd of boys, dressed so exactly alike that there was no distinguishing any particular one. Her fingers tightened over Jimmy's soft wee hand; but the word was given, and she had only time to stoop hurriedly and kiss his brow when he disappeared, as it seemed to her, for there was no discerning Jim now from others. She held his discarded dress in her hands, and rapidly counted the boys as they filed past.

'Ninety-six is his number,' she muttered, but she failed to identify her pretty brother. 'Number ninety-six, not Jimmy,' she cried within herself, then turned and ran away under shelter of the darkness.

I scarcely like to say how long this sensible young woman took to walk home that night. It was not the evening one would have chosen for a solitary ramble, but Maggie walked round the Meadows

more than twice before she thought of going home, and when she got there she found a great many things to do before she had time to seek her father's room.

James Fenwick was asleep when his daughter came to him, but his wife's Bible and Jim's drawing-book were lying under his clasped hands; and although the poor sightless eyes could peruse neither, evidently comfort had come from them somehow, for a happy smile was on his pale and worn face.

Dr. Mackenzie's kindness did not stop short with Heriot's. Every comfort that a warm heart and generous hand could suggest found their way through mysterious by-ways to the invalid's room, and to the good physician's surprise and gratification, Fenwick's health improved greatly, although he became totally blind. Maggie grew more and more expert at her 'trade,' as she merrily called the delicate manipulating of wood into fairy networks; and the same kind friend who helped father and brother secured many a paying job for her fingers. Every Saturday Jim's light feet flew up the long stair, and his happy face spoke better even than his eager tongue in praise of the Hospital life. Fenwick made him tell of all his classes, his games, his companions, and his daily occupations. He never tired of listening to Jim's stories of Heriot's, and he would

pass his hand slowly over the boy's shoulders, that he might know how he grew and strengthened. Jim would stretch his arms proudly, that his father might feel how gymnastics and drill were swelling the muscles; he would draw pictures, and jabber Latin or French, that all his accomplishments might be fully lauded.

Then, as time went on, and earnest life began to deepen Jim's character, at the same time developing the enthusiasm of a vigorous intellect, he would talk seriously, not as boys talk, of what he saw in the future and of what he hoped to win. 'I shall not be satisfied,' he said, when he had been three years in the Hospital, 'unless I win our highest honours, the gold medal and a bursary;' and with that object always in view Jim steadily worked his way upwards.

Entering into the boy's feelings, Fenwick learned daily to rejoice more and more over his son's prospects, and to thank God for saving Jim from the miserable life which might have been his had no such noble institution as Heriot's Hospital existed. In a quiet, patient way the sick man taught himself to bury in his own heart its constant longing for Jim's presence, and to wait the Lord's time.

He waited longer than any one had dared hope; but when Jim was almost fourteen, and beginning to think with feverish expectancy of prizes very near his attainment, Maggie followed the doctor once

more into the little parlour, and looked the question she could not ask in words.

‘Yes, he will soon rest now,’ Dr. Mackenzie said ; ‘but don’t tell the boy. Your father knows that he is going, and is as happy as anybody can be who expects soon to meet the one he loves best. I had a long talk with him the other day, and we have settled that you shall come and stay with my wife, who needs a daughter now she is growing old. Make the last days as bright for him as you have made the past, my child ; your father does not want Jim to know, as it might unsettle him just now when he is fighting for the medal. Be brave, Maggie, be like yourself.’

The doctor talked on quietly and anyhow, for he knew that the tears must come, and his gentle words were best unanswered. Poor girl ! Her ‘cry’ did not last long, and her voice was as cheery as ever when she talked that evening with her father. They agreed to let the time slip past, and Jimmy was not to know that the parting hour had almost come. The last few Saturdays before the examinations were spent by the boy in study and eager speculation as to his chance of success, into all of which his dying parent entered with a zest and interest equal to Jim’s own.

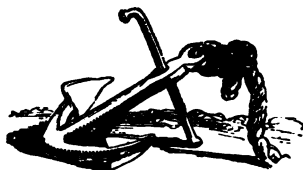
‘If I have a wish left,’ Fenwick said one morning, when he had heard Jimmy’s footsteps die away, as

he hastened off to the Hospital, 'it is that I may live through next week, that the dear boy may have the pleasure of telling me the result of all his work.'

'I think you will, dear father, for I asked God that you might,' Maggie replied simply. But on the last day of the examinations a change came over James Fenwick, and his daughter in great trouble sent for her faithful friend the doctor. Dr. Mackenzie came, and saw that the end was very near. He called Maggie, and together they sat for some hours, doing all that love and skill could suggest to prolong the waning life. The summer evening was drawing to its close, and glowing showers of sunlight poured in through the window, which, with the doors, had been opened, that the invalid might have all the air possible. Upon the solemn, silent scene of coming death there broke the noise of eager young feet hurrying up the stair; then a fresh voice, whose accents bore the clear ring of joy, burst forth: 'Hurrah! father—Maggie! the medal is mine! I've won the bursary—hurrah for old Heriot! Hurrah for the University! Hu—' But Jim's shout was checked as he found himself in the centre of his father's death-chamber.

Fenwick stretched out his feeble fingers, and Dr. Mackenzie drew the awe-struck boy within their reach. Very tenderly they strayed over his glowing face. 'Mary's brow and soft hair,' he murmured,

‘and her small mouth—kiss me, Jimmy.’ His hands dropped nearly to Jim’s neck, and encountered the gold medal suspended there by its gay ribbon. The loving fingers that had grown so pale and chill closed softly over his boy’s trophy. ‘Jimmy cared for; thank God for Heriot’s!’ he said in a clear whisper. A satisfied smile flashed with the parting sunbeams across his features; and then the shadow of the Lord’s messenger sealed them for all time.





IN FATHER'S PLACE





IN FATHER'S PLACE.

CHAPTER I.

BIDDING GOOD-BYE.



IT was early morning in May. The birds had not been awake very long, so you may be sure the sun had not been up many hours. But he was shining very brightly, and the birds were singing very merrily. Only human bipeds were asleep, and did not know what a time of beauty and sweetness was slipping by while they lay in bed.

The manse folks were early risers as a rule—that

is, they got up about six, but it wanted a long time of six o'clock, and the sparrows and mice were making the most of the quiet period left, by hopping and creeping close to windows and doors, confident of not being disturbed.

Very much surprised were they when the back door softly opened, and two little girls stepped out. They wore black frocks and no cloak of any kind, so they could not be going on a long journey. Perhaps to rob birds' nests, thought the sparrows. Perhaps to set traps, thought the mice. Ah! the sad expression of both young faces said that the girls were bent upon no such errands of mischief or fun.

They held each other's hand, and stepped slowly out into the sunshine.

'It's a lovely morning. I am glad to see everything looking its best to-day,' said the elder child in a gentle voice.

'I wish it rained and poured, and the sky were black with clouds. I wish there were lightning and thunder and snow—heaps of snow,' said the younger girl, frowning.

Her sister took no notice of the words, but remarked, 'We will go to the garden first—eh, Madge?'

Madge merely nodded her acquiescence, so to the garden they went, and walked silently along each

path, stopping now and then beside some favourite flower-bed, or in front of a pet tree, but never speaking a word.

When they reached the summer-house some very tender memory seemed touched, for two large tears rolled down the elder girl's cheeks, while the younger frowned as before, and struck her foot among the grasses, as if it were a great effort to repress herself in other ways ; still no words were spoken.

The two strange little creatures stood there a long time ; then, plucking a few blossoms from the boughs that twined around the summer-house, they quietly moved away towards the stables and barn-yard.

On the way they passed the swing which their father had fixed between two grand old trees. Isa looked the other way, and walked more quickly when they reached that spot ; but Madge suddenly dropped her sister's hand, and, jumping into the swing, sent it off to sweep through the air with a steady, rapid motion.

Neither spoke for quite ten minutes, and when Madge had had enough of the swing, she dropped quietly from it, took Isa's hand as before, and went on.

When the couple reached the stable-yard they sought the corn-bin, and taking a handful of oats,

they scattered it for the fowls, who crowded round the children with much familiarity.

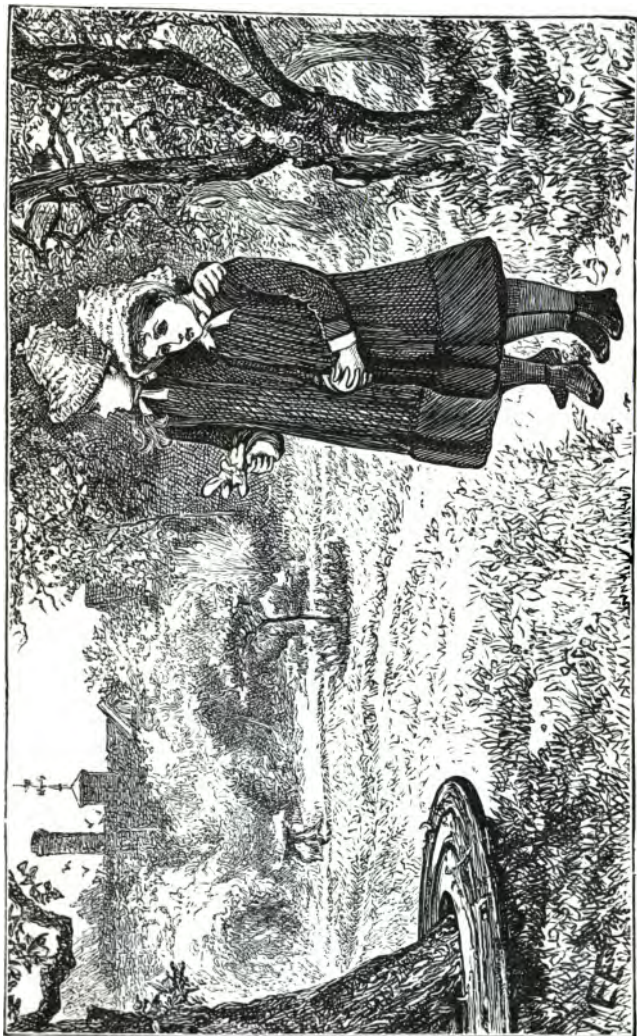
After that they peeped into the byre and stroked the cows.

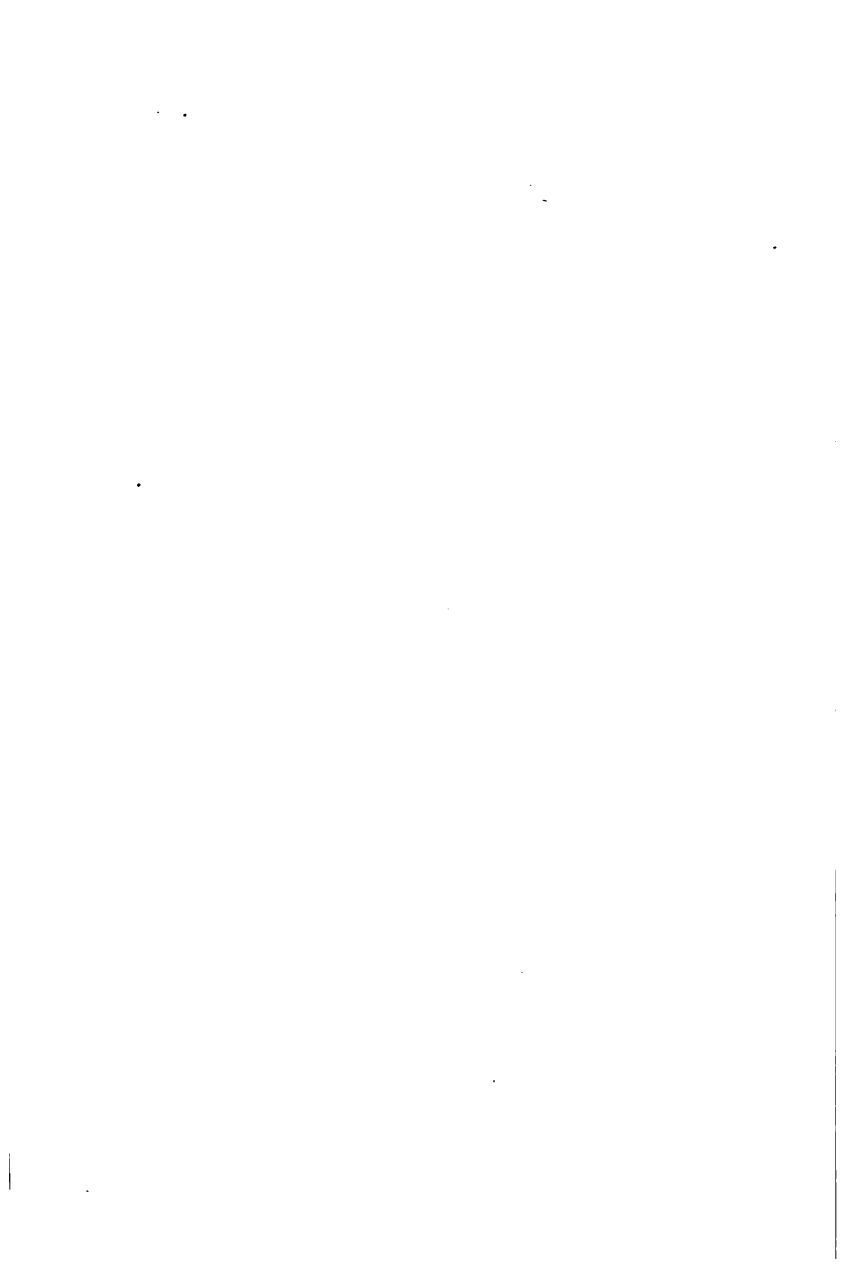
The visit to the stable was longer. The big farm-horse was fondled again and again, and the minister's pony, which had done good service for years, was clasped and kissed by both the girls.

Madge took some crusts from her pocket and fed the horses, while Isa cut a bit of hair from each mane. Still they did not speak, and, after a last lingering caress, they left the stables and passed into a meadow which separated the manse from the church.

It was a pretty church, standing, after the old fashion, in the midst of the graveyard of the parish. Trees of great age spread their bountiful arms over the church and yard; and many a song-bird warbled the story of its innocent and most happy life above the tombstones.

There was a narrow footpath through the meadow grasses, by which the minister had been accustomed to go to church. His household went round by the avenue, but he had a fancy for walking alone when going to conduct service. Thus the manse children had not often used that path—they had rather avoided it as being associated with Sunday and





solemn thoughts. But how often had they watched their father come and go along it! As the little girls moved slowly onwards by that sacred path, they remembered how frequently their eyes had followed him there.

They remembered, also, with intense pain, that never more would they see the dear familiar form on that or any other earthly path; and the tears of both, bravely repressed till then, broke forth in a bitter flood.

Isa's arm went round Madge's neck, for even in her sorrow the thoughtful elder sister strove to impart comfort and express her sympathy, and thus linked together, and sobbing unrestrainedly, they entered the churchyard and found their way to the minister's grave.

The turf upon it was beginning to grow green, and a number of cut flowers were carefully arranged around it.

The children's feet paused close to where their father's tired head was lying so low, and for one moment the tears were stayed. Then Madge, crying out, 'Oh, papa! I cannot live without papa!' flung herself upon the earth, sobbing wildly, and scattering the flowers in a passion of rebellious grief.

Isa sobbed too, but more softly; then, seeing that her little sister's anguish grew more wild the more it

was indulged, the thoughtful creature checked her tears and strove to soothe Madge.

'Don't take on so, Madgie dear,' she said; 'we must bear what God sends.'

'God didn't do it! He never would have been so cruel. There was no one so good as papa. Oh, papa!'

'Very likely God needed him, Madge. Will thinks so.'

'But I needed him more, and I can't—I won't go away and leave him—leave my own papa here!'

'He is not here, Childie,' said a kind voice that was not Isa's, though like hers in its tone of protecting care.

The girls looked up to see their eldest brother standing close by.

'Oh, Will,' said Isa, clasping his arm with both her hands,—'Oh, Will, I am so glad you have come!'

Madge sprang up and faced Will defiantly. 'Don't call me "Childie," Will!' she cried. 'No one must ever call me that. It was the name he gave me. I was his own "Childie,"—my papa's very own little girl.'

'Yes, Madge, I know,' the lad replied, a little coldly; 'but you must really—'

'You've come to look after us,' she interrupted

hotly. 'You want to make us go home, Will, but I won't! I want to die, and be with him!' And again she flung herself on the grave and sobbed convulsively.

Will and Isa stood silently by for a few minutes. Then the brother, stooping, put his arms gently but firmly around Madge, and, lifting her, in spite of an effort she made to escape, said, 'Dear Madgie, I know it has been a greater grief to you than to any of us. I promised father that I would try to take his place to all his bairns. Won't you let me comfort you for his sake?'

'But you don't care for me, Will,' she muttered. 'You only do it because papa asked you. No one cares for me. I want papa—I want papa!'

'Oh, little sister, I do care for you!' exclaimed Will, with a touch of remorseful suffering in his voice. But Madge did not notice that, and only cried on.

Presently Will said, in a low voice,—

'Madge, darling, suppose papa could hear and see us still.'

She was quiet at once, and asked in a startled tone,—

'Will, is it possible he knows?'

'Even if he does not, you would not like to do anything that would vex him. He may not see us now, or know what we are doing, but some day you

hope to meet him, and you would like to be able to tell him that you never had forgotten all the good words he said to you, but had striven always to be the loving, unselfish girl he tried to make you when he was here.'

'I will never forget any word he ever said to me,' Madge answered slowly, with her eyes upon her father's grave, and trying still to withdraw herself from Will's arms ; but he held her fast, and went on talking softly.

'I am very grieved, dear Madge, if I have let you think that I do not care for you. Some day you will understand things better. Now say you forgive me, and let me be another father to you. Just here beside his grave I promise to fill his place to you as far as any one can. Give me a part of your love, dear, and try to believe what I say.'

'I'll try,' Madge whispered, with a certain reluctance in her voice, which rather chilled her brother's sympathies ; but he rose up, still holding her in his arms, while Isa rearranged the flowers.

He carried Madge home, and, laying her on his own bed, persuaded Isa to join her, while he sat beside them talking softly of the life beyond earth—the life which their father had begun, and which they hoped to enter upon by and by.

When the household was beginning to stir, the

girls had fallen asleep, lulled by their brother's voice.

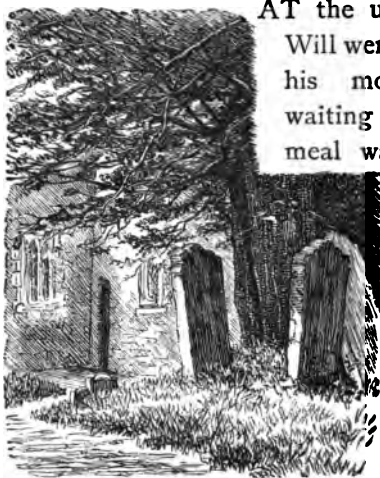
As he gazed at their pale, tear-stained little faces, Will's own tears came, and, kneeling by the couch, he sought aid to be, as he had promised, a father to his fatherless sisters.





CHAPTER II.

LEAVING THE MANSE.



AT the usual breakfast hour Will went down-stairs to find his mother and brothers waiting impatiently. The meal was to be somewhat

of a scramble, for the greater part of the house-belongings were packed, or already in the new home to which the family were going that day.

Mrs. Vancroft had taken her place by the tea-cups, and was glancing fretfully at the empty seats around the table. She

was a small, pretty woman, rather feeble both physically and mentally, and very much engrossed at all times with her own small self. Her parents had spoiled her, she being their only daughter, and her husband, who was fifteen years her senior, had done very much the same thing ; so that the poor creature had been ill-prepared to face adversity without the support of either parent or husband.

Selfish mothers often have unselfish sons, and Mrs. Vancroft's boys vied with each other in taking upon themselves many of her home duties and in waiting upon her ; and the result of so much petting was a conviction of her own extreme delicacy and need of attention. If at any time it seemed that any member of her family was forgetful of her requirements, Mrs. Vancroft was apt to be a little cross. Thus she was not in a pleasant mood on finding that her children had not all assembled on her arrival at the breakfast table.

'Late, Will !' she exclaimed. 'Why did you not hurry the girls when you passed their room ? Every one late to-day when so much has to be done ! Jack, go and call your sisters.'

'They are out,' said Jack. 'I went to their room on my way down-stairs, but the birds had flown.'

'They are asleep in my room, mother,' said

Will sadly. 'Poor little souls! They got up at daybreak to pay farewell visits all over the place.'

Jack and Ben stared, and the mother remarked petulantly, 'Some eccentric idea of Madgie's, of course. Like her queer ways; and then she will be tired and cross all day, giving no end of bother. What a child she is!'

'If they are left to sleep it off, I daresay they will be all right in the afternoon,' said Jack cheerfully; then turning to Will he asked, 'How did you find them?'

Will's pale face flushed, and he stammered: 'Well, to say the truth, I got up for the same purpose, and I found them crying—poor lassies! They can't bear trouble as boys do, Jack.'

Jack's lip had been trembling, but at his brother's last words he braced himself together again, and answered manfully,—

'They'll be all right when once we are off, and the putting things in order will keep their minds busy. Ben, old chap, we will have to get up some fun for the girls and the babies.'

Ben, an urchin of five, nodded solemnly, and assailed his porridge, and Mrs. Vancroft said fretfully, 'How you do chatter, Jack! I do not know how I shall ever get through this day. No one to help! I know I shall break my heart before it is all over.'

‘Poor little mother! But we will do everything for you, won’t we, Will! Why, Will is a host in himself.’

‘You are very good boys when all is said,’ the weak woman answered, with a wan smile. ‘But I do think your aunt might have come to assist. Old maids have no thought.’

‘I think it would have been a greater trial to Auntie than it is to us,’ Will replied.

‘Nonsense!’ said his mother impatiently; ‘she has lived out of the manse for years, and she does not have strong feelings. I am sure I wish I were like Auntie in that respect;’ and then Mrs. Vancroft cried a little,—crying which the boys never could bear to see, but which was easily stopped by the post-man’s knock.

Ben ran off to bring in the letters, which included one for Will.

His father’s sister, the aunt aforementioned, had addressed all her communications for the family to Will since the minister’s death (which had occurred some months before the time of which I am writing) therefore no comment was made upon his receiving a letter from her.

Will was the eldest, a grave lad of seventeen, and considering what manner of woman Mrs. Vancroft was, it was not wonderful that Auntie turned to Will as the more fit head of the house.

Will did not always like Auntie's long letters of advice and suggestions, and he thought, as he opened the one which had arrived on the morning of his last day in the old home, that a better opportunity for giving him good advice might have been found.

Very much surprised was Will — and indeed all of them—to find that the letter contained no 'old maid's preaching,' but a cheque for twenty pounds!

Auntie was considered stingy in money matters. Her letter was characteristic, so I give it:—

'I meant to be with you myself,' she wrote; 'but I cannot bear to witness the departure from our old home. My grandfather, father, and brother lived and died at the manse, and I had expected to see my nephew minister there.

'I enclose a little money, which you will expend as you see fit in adding comfort to the journey. Your dear useless mother has not been accustomed to "roughing it."

'And now, my dear boy Will, I know what a day of trial the last will be to you. Perhaps I know better than you do yourself what a burden you took up when you promised your dying father that you would do your best to stand in his place. I do indeed know that you are practising

a great self-denial, and that all depends upon you. Be strong and of good courage, resting on your father's God, who will help you through all difficulties.'

Will did not read this letter to any one, but often during the day he turned to Auntie's words for comfort.

At Jack's suggestion, Will arranged that the departure should take place in the evening, when it would be light enough to go away in comfort, but no sun shining to show the old place in all its quiet loveliness.

One of the kirk elders had kindly offered to drive Mrs. Vancroft in his carriage to the station ; so the little ones and their mother were stowed in the roomy conveyance, while Will and Jack were to follow in the manse dogcart.

The new minister had arrived before the family left, and his servants were bustling about, so there could be no going stealthily into old rooms to take last looks. Nor was there that deepest sorrow of any, the closing silently of old home doors for the last time.

When the carriage swept out of the avenue, Jack led his horse slowly down, and waited on the road below the church until Will, escorted by his father's successor, joined him.

'Good-bye, my lads, a pleasant journey to you, and a pleasant future,' said the new minister heartily, as he shook hands with the brothers, who could not even utter commonplace words of adieu in reply.

Will took his seat at the back, while Jack jumped up in front and shook the reins impatiently. Then both turned their heads the other way when the dogcart rapidly passed a certain part of the churchyard.

But a perfume of spring-flowers came from Jack's neighbourhood, and, glancing across, Will saw a small bunch of violets and lily of the valley peeping from Jack's pocket. Restless, rollicking Jack, who had been full of animal spirits all that day, who had seemed to mind less than any one the going away, who had laughed and shouted and let everybody call him heartless,—Jack had brought those flowers from the father's grave.

Will, being on the back seat, could not see his brother's face. He was glad of that, but he leaned across and took a flower from the bunch, and at that moment the two so opposite in character were drawn nearer to each other than they had ever been before.

'There's a battle before us, old fellow,' said Will; 'but we'll fight it out shoulder to shoulder, eh, Jack?'

Jack turned wet eyes with a look of astonish-

ment upon Will. 'Ay, I'll stand by you if you will let me,' he said.

'Let you!' echoed Will surprisedly.

'Yes. Truth is, I thought you believed I wasn't of much use at any time. I never expected **you** would treat me as if I were not one of the children, to be corrected and managed—'

'Oh, Jack,' said Will sorrowfully, 'I did not mean to come the elder brother over you like that.'

'I don't mind,' answered Jack. 'I made up my mind to stand any of your airs for father's sake, and because I believe you think I need a deal of looking after. But perhaps I am not such a fool as I look, Will!'

'I know you are a better fellow than I am, boy-Jack.'

'Nonsense! I have been too outspoken, as usual, I see; but I wasn't exactly prepared for your talking to me as if we two stood on equal ground, and you can't think how happy it makes me to feel that you are going to let me share your responsibilities.'

'You will be the greatest help to me, Jack. It lightens my heart of half its care to have you step up from among my responsibilities and take a place as burden-bearer beside me;' and Will sighed heavily

'Well, to be sure, I am glad,' was Jack's cheery answer. 'I was afraid I would have hard times with you in father's place. He was always so forgiving, and helped me out of scrapes instead of scolding about them. But I see I was all wrong about you, and you shall see—I'll follow your lead, Will.'

'We will stand by each other, boy-Jack,' said Will.





CHAPTER III.

THE NEW HOME.



THE mother had, as she predicted, broken down very considerably at the last, and the boys had no easy task to perform during the two hours' journey to Edinburgh, for the little ones, seeing their mother cry, thought they must cry too.

Will and Jack vied with each other in attempting to comfort the others, and their efforts were not without success, so that, when the party reached the door of their city home, even Mrs. Vancroft could smile at Jack's joke about 'learning to go up the rigging.'

To understand the joke you must know that their reduced income prevented them from taking any better house than a top flat in one of those stately buildings which add so much to the architectural beauty of Edinburgh, but which do not convey to one's mind a picture of home.

The old servant who had been with Mrs. Vancroft since her marriage had been sent to Edinburgh some days before to prepare the house for its new inmates. Will, ever mindful of the mother, asked Jack to take her up the long flight of stairs while he looked to the luggage. Ben was the first to commence the ascent. He was followed by Isa, carefully guiding little Ella's tottering feet. Then came Jack with his mother on one arm and her baby on the other. Lagging behind, with a black cloud on her brow and a protest in her gait, came Madge.

Mrs. Vancroft's heart sank at every step of that upward way. This home-coming was painfully contrasted with her arrival at the home she had just quitted. Then she had stepped from her smart little carriage on to the manse lawn, so green and soft and fresh, and (led by her husband) she had been greeted on the threshold by the good sister who had welcomed a young bride to the manse as few unmarried sisters do. These two had shielded her from all care during the whole period of her married life, and it was not wonderful that her

thoughts were with them while ascending those interminable steps.

At last the door was reached. It stood open, and on the threshold stood trusty old Janet and—Auntie!

‘Good boy!’ were her first words, addressed to Jack with a nod. ‘Well, Anna, how do you find yourself?—bairns all tired? will sleep the sounder.’ Without waiting for a reply, Miss Vancroft led the way to a cosy sitting-room, where fire and gas were doing their best to say ‘Welcome.’ A bountiful tea-dinner was spread on the table. Mrs. Vancroft’s own especial easy-chair, with baby’s bassinette, stood by the side of the fire.

‘There, sit down and rest,’ said Auntie; and in a grim, methodical manner, as if she knew nothing about either feelings or fancies, she assisted Mrs. Vancroft to unfasten her bonnet and shawl, at the same time telling Isa and Madge to do a like service for the little ones. ‘And come with me; I will show you where to put their things.’ The girls meekly followed her into a bedroom, where she deposited their mother’s wraps. ‘Poor thing!’ Auntie murmured, quite forgetful that she had listeners, and she passed her hand gently over the crimped and snowy border of the widow’s bonnet. The girls stole back to the dining-room, where Will had arrived, and where Auntie soon joined them.

'Ah, Will, my lad? so you've got them all safe through! Now I wonder who of the whole family would have got here in safety if you had not been there to look after them?'

The severe expression of Miss Vancroft's face had relaxed wonderfully as soon as she saw Will. Even her voice had lost much of its abrupt and rather hard tones.

'Indeed, Auntie,' laughed Will, 'I have done very little except look after boxes and the like. It was Jack who took care of the bairns. I am sure Ben would have left his head in a tunnel, and Ella her fingers in the railway carriage doors, if they had not been looked after by Jack.'

'Jack!' exclaimed Auntie with a contemptuous sniff, which brought an angry flush to Jack's brow.

Said Will, taking no notice of Miss Vancroft's look and action, 'What good fairy sent you here, Auntie? And don't the bairns look at home already!'

The youngsters had possessed themselves of chairs around the table, and were eyeing the poached eggs, which Janet brought in, rather hungrily. 'Very much at home, bairns,' laughed Jack.

'Follow their example, big boy, who does not call himself a bairn,' said Auntie; adding to her sister-in-law, 'Anna, you had better stay where you are, and I will pour out tea for those ravens.'

Will brought up a gipsy table for his mother,

while Jack deposited Ella in her high chair on the hearth-rug beside Mrs. Vancroft. Then he took the place next Madge. Isa and Ben were on the opposite side of the table, and the tea-tray at the top indicated where Miss Vancroft was to be located.

There was an empty chair at the other end, where some carving was to be performed.

It had been the custom at the manse, when the minister was absent, for two or even three small chairs to occupy the lower end of the table, and that habit had been continued during the last few months, indeed ever since death had stepped in to overturn all the home regulations.

But Auntie's methodical mind had presided over the arrangement of the table that evening, therefore the chairs were placed in due order round the board.

'There is no place for Will,' cried little Ben.

'Yes, where the carvers are, you stupid elf,' said Jack very hastily.

But Ben, quite forgetful for the moment, answered, 'That's papa's chair.'

Madge dropped her head suddenly on her breast; Mrs. Vancroft's handkerchief went to her eyes; Jack kicked the table, and Isa sighed softly; while Ben, suddenly remembering, made matters worse by saying sorrowfully, 'Oh, I forgot.'

There was a painful silence. Then very slowly and gently Auntie spoke :

‘Will, that place belongs to you. Now ask a blessing, please ; the children are waiting.’

And Will, taking his father’s seat, performed one of his father’s duties with a solemnity which impressed the young folks with wonder. They could not know what taking the father’s seat meant to their brother.

Ever since the minister’s death, the daily life of his family had been very much of a scramble. Regular hours, order of any kind, had not been observed, for Mrs. Vancroft had spent her time on the sofa, or in bed, and each child had done just very much as it pleased in the matter of being tidy, punctual, or considerate.

Auntie’s presence, the neat table she had prepared, her well-known habits of order and neatness, had suddenly aroused Will to the knowledge that the children had been running wild, and that an effort must be made to bring them back to the ‘ways’ which they had when the head of the house was present, directing and controlling them all.

Yet, after his talk with Jack, Will felt that he would require to watch himself most carefully, lest a too dictatorial manner, or assumption of too much authority, might have a bad effect on the others. He desired most earnestly to guide them aright

through the power of love, yet he knew that some little strictness would be required, and he feared now that they might resent his insisting on obedience to his wishes as an attempt on his part to 'come the elder brother' too strongly. And if such an idea as that got into the small heads, good-bye to all his hopes of standing to the children in father's place.

By and by Mrs. Vancroft, becoming sensible of the fact that her children were not so well behaved as they used to be, said apologetically, 'I fear you must see a difference in the children's manners since they lost their poor dear father, who had such a way with them all.'

'I do see a marked difference,' Miss Vancroft replied grimly.

'My health is so wretched, you know, Martha, and I never was a manager like you, and really—' There she took refuge in her handkerchief, and her children, much subdued again, looked at Auntie as though she were to blame for the tears which never failed to make them all feel guilty of some indefinable crime.

'I know,' Auntie said, 'that you never were capable of keeping a troop of healthy children in order, and you never will be. But you have got—' A pause, then in a very gentle tone, 'and his father has got, a good substitute in Will.'

'Bairns,' she added vehemently, and turning

suddenly from Mrs. Vancroft to the others,—‘bairns, you cannot know what a charge you are to your



brother. Don't make it too hard for him. Will loves you with a strong, unselfish love, and if you disobey and grieve him, you will make his duty a very heavy care indeed. He will only wish you to do what is right. Do try never, never to forget that every family must have a head, and that Will is now in father's place, to be loved and honoured as the father was.'

Auntie stopped there abruptly, as if she had been carried away by feeling into saying too much. 'Now go to bed,' she added.

The children bade their mother and aunt good-

night ; then by a new impulse they all—except Madge—ran to Will, and kissed him. An hour later, when Will had gone to his room, a little apparition in a white night-dress came to him. It was Madge, pale, with red eyelids and disordered hair. Never a word she uttered, but clasped her arms tightly round his neck and knelt in his lap with her head buried in his arms. Will was beginning dimly to learn that there were mysterious depths in that child-heart which no one could comprehend, and that she must not be judged as one would judge an ordinary child. So he did not speak more than she, only stroked her hair tenderly ; and after a little she whispered, ‘I could say my prayers here.’

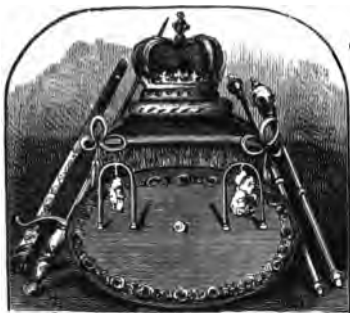
The next few minutes were too sacred for us to touch upon. They were remembered by Will all his life,—the little trembling night-robed figure, the clinging hands, the broken voice, the holy words, the mute striving of a frightened soul to make itself understood. She stole away as quietly as she had come, but she left a memory with her brother that haunted him for evermore.





CHAPTER IV.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.



‘AND now what are you all going to do?’ asked Auntie one evening. The Vancrofts had been in their new home little more than a week, and Will and Jack

had found that the only way to make a flat endurable is to take restless noisy children out of it as much as possible. Accordingly each day one or other of the brothers had acted as chaperon, and had carried the younger ones to see a number of the Edinburgh ‘Lions.’

Miss Vancroft had said and done very little during the whole week, as far as the household affairs were concerned, but she had been taking observations in a quiet way, and now she spoke.

‘What are you all going to do, and what is going to be done with you all?’

‘I am sure I cannot tell,’ said Mrs. Vancroft, in her limp and helpless manner. ‘I have absolutely no means beyond what the Ministers’ Widows’ Fund gives, and that—as you know—is a mere pittance. Now, isn’t it?’

‘Not much among so many,’ Auntie answered shortly.

‘Mr. Macrae has promised me a berth in the first of his ships which may want a “likely young man,” so I am out of the reckoning already,’ said Jack.

Miss Vancroft’s face softened visibly. Jack had never been a favourite with her, for his mischievous propensities had frequently caused her no little annoyance. She was fond of snubbing Jack—all the more because Jack hated to be snubbed. But if there was one virtue more than another that Miss Vancroft admired, that was an independent spirit, and she liked what Jack said, so nodded her quaint nod of approval, and remarked aside, ‘Fourteen his last birthday. Good! He’ll do.’

‘I think I mentioned to you not long ago,’ said Mrs. Vancroft, ‘that Bailie Hunter promised to use his influence to have one or more of the children received into some of the institutions or hospitals, as they call them; and I thought that would be a good plan for some of the bairns—at least my Uncle

George thought of it, and it seemed nice when he talked of it ; but I do not know if it would really be suitable, or indeed what has to be done about it, or anything. I never could understand business, Martha.'

'Did your uncle mention any particular hospital ?

'Yes ; a place called The Institution.'

'I know it very well. It was founded for the benefit of professional men's children.'

'You know about everything, Martha.'

'Umph ! Well, have you decided which of your children shall be nominated for this place ?'

'Isa is required at home,' Mrs. Vancroft replied quickly. 'She is so helpful with Ella and baby.'

'And Ben and Ella are too young, so it must be Madge—and good for her too—she requires discipline. Number two disposed of ; who comes next ?'

'I think I do, Auntie,' said Will. 'I think I ought to have been sent adrift first, being such a big, useless sort of bairn.'

'Very well ; let us hear how you think of taking yourself off your mother's income without leaving the family headless.'

'A friend of father's has promised me a place in his office—'

'Promised ! You are too hurried, Will, too hurried. Don't fix anything, and we will talk over your affairs another time. Now, Anna, I think we

may suppose we have got three of them off your hands.'

'Excuse me, Auntie,' interrupted Will. Then to Mrs. Vancroft, 'Mother dear, could not Madge be taught to mind baby? It does not seem exactly fair to decide upon sending a younger child from home when there is an older one who could go. I daresay, if some one would teach her, Madge would learn to be as useful as Isa.'

'Useful indeed! Mind baby! I should find him dropped in the fender, or choking on a spoon. I wonder at you, Will, thinking for one moment of sending Isa away—your favourite, too.'

'I believe Will is speaking from a sense of justice,' said Miss Vancroft. 'And he is quite right so far. It would be unfair if one were influenced in one's decision by partiality; but there are many points to be considered. Above all, we must think which child would derive most benefit from school discipline, and which one can be of most use at home.'

'There can be no two opinions on those points,' said Jack, smiling; but Will was very grave, and his aunt, noting the expression of his face, asked shortly,—

'What is it, Will? State the difficulties as they appear to you.'

'I was only thinking, if dear father's opinion were asked, what decision he would give.'

'Your poor father always spoiled Madge, you know,' sighed the mother.

'I believe,' replied Will firmly, 'that he petted her so much because he knew that she needed encouraging, and perhaps because somehow she rather went to the wall among us. We have not been fair to Madge, I fear. She can't help being awkward, and she might be less shy if we ~~had~~ been more patient with her.'

Mrs. Vancroft was a little ashamed to own, even to herself, that the pretty face and gentle manners of one child had won for it a larger portion of maternal affection than had been bestowed upon the plain-featured contrary child, so listened meekly to what Will said, and he went on :

'Madge is striving to improve, only she had got an idea that she is not loved much by any of us, and I am just afraid we have given the poor child some cause to think so.'

'A sad business,' said Auntie, 'for a child when it takes up such a notion, whether right or wrong. Their father thought Madge the most clever of your children, did he not?'

'He thought all the world of her,' replied Mrs. Vancroft.

'Very clever children require careful handling, for they generally have peculiar temperaments. However, this is a serious matter that we have to decide,

and feeling must be put aside from us all. How would it answer to ask the girls themselves to say which shall go? That would test their characters, at least.'

'If that plan is adopted, I know who is sure to go. Isa always makes it a point of conscience to yield to the others,' Mrs. Vancroft replied; and Jack said,—

'Toss up for it,'—a remark which made the others laugh in spite of their serious talk. Then Auntie said,—

'I should like to have things settled about you all before I leave, as I must next week. Will, you and I will have a quiet chat together in the morning.'





CHAPTER V.

BEING PUT TO THE TEST.

THE nature of Auntie's 'quiet chat' took Will very much by surprise. In her usual abrupt and concise manner, she announced her ideas on the subject of his future career in life.

'Taking everything into consideration,' she said, 'I believe it will be best for you to go on with the university education so well begun. Nature gave you talents which should be cultivated.'

'But it can't be done,' replied Will regretfully.

'Stop a bit, Will! It was your father's hope that you might be qualified to follow in his steps. It is in my power to help your family to a certain extent, and after much careful thought, I have come to the conclusion that the best way to give efficient assistance will be by seeing you through your university course, free of all expense to your mother.'

The Vancrofts had very vague ideas regarding Auntie's income or savings, so Will could not know how much of daily comfort she would be denying herself by such generosity to him. Her small 'savings' and a good slice of her limited income would have to be sacrificed, though it was none of her intention that he should know that.

But Will could be generous too, and begged his aunt to give her help for the girls instead, and so prevent the necessity of their being sent out in the world while they were young.

Miss Vancroft had considered that point, and soon showed Will very clearly how much less useful such assistance would be in the end. Then, to settle the matter, she declared that if Will refused to carry out the cherished scheme of all their hearts in the way indicated, her pecuniary aid should be withheld altogether from them all. After that announcement there was nothing left for Will to do but accept her offer with gratitude.

'Now about the girls,' said Miss Vancroft, when she had settled Will's affairs to her satisfaction, 'I confess that I very much wish to see how they will act if left to choose; and though we may or may not accept their decision, it is well to have their feelings sounded on the subject.'

'It will have to be gradually and gently done,' said the thoughtful brother.

A favourable opportunity arrived on the last evening of Auntie's stay. Jack had just received a good appointment in a ship which would sail in a few days. His father's friend had much admired the manly spirit in which Jack had declared his willingness to do any work, however humble, which would enable him to be independent, and Mr. Macrae had determined to give the boy a helping hand. Accordingly he paid (himself) a premium, and Jack was entered as gentleman-apprentice on board a fine vessel, so he did not begin so very low in the service as he had intended doing.

Jack's family had been thrown into considerable confusion in consequence of his sudden call to the business of life. He was the first of the young ones to leave home, and it was a serious event.

Isa and Madge sat in a corner, open-eyed at all which the older folks were saying about the ship, the voyage, outfit, messmates, etc.

More than once, when the long absence from home was touched upon, Madge shivered and crept nearer to Isa. Jack had become exalted into a hero in Madge's estimation, for the boy or girl who could leave home and go alone among strangers must be a marvel of courage and independence, she thought, judging all the world by herself. But very soon her attention was drawn to a remark made by Auntie.

‘And who,’ Miss Vancroft was saying, ‘more of mother’s bairns will be willing, when the time comes, to go away for her sake?’

Auntie’s eyes involuntarily travelled towards the corner where Isa and Madge were ensconced, and the flush that came to each face showed that they were taking home her hint.

Madge crept rather nearer the wall, and hung her head, and Isa, lifting her clear eyes to Auntie’s, asked, ‘Could girls help in that way like boys?’

Will and Jack exchanged glances, and Mrs. Vancroft, as usual, subsided behind her handkerchief.

‘I will tell you how girls can do it,’ Auntie replied. ‘There are places where children live and have all the comforts of home and the advantages of school, and no one pays any money for having them there. The money was given long ago by good people who wished to help children whose poor fathers had not been able to save money for the same purpose. It is one of the ways by which God keeps His promise to be a father to the fatherless.’

Here Auntie made a long pause, and every one was quite silent. Then she added gently, ‘Mother will have to ask one of her girls to go there soon—’

‘I can’t go among strangers! I can’t and I won’t!’ burst from Madge. Some terrible instinct had warned her, at the beginning of Auntie’s speech to

them, that she was going to be sent from home, and every other thought was swallowed up by that dreadful conviction. A passionate rebellion had frequently averted some disagreeable duty from her before, therefore her first blind impulse was to protest violently. But she could say no more, and sat dumb after uttering those few words.

Isa sighed softly, and glanced at the beloved babies, but she spoke very steadily. 'I will go if you all think that I should.'

'Thank you, dear,' said Auntie; 'you are a good, unselfish child, but nothing is fixed upon; we shall see.' She would have added a reproof to Madge, but a look at Will had stopped that.

Madge gazed around defiantly, but as her glance passed from face to face, reading disapprobation in all, it fell at last upon Will. There was no displeasure in his face—only regret and sorrow. Their eyes met. What was it in Will's eyes that reminded Madge of her father's oft-repeated and most tender counsels? She felt choking. Her breast heaved, and tears rose to her eyes, quenching their passionate fire at once. Madge forgot every one in the room but Will, and rising from her corner she crept to his knee, where she was silently but affectionately greeted.

The conversation had reverted to Jack, and no one seemed to have noticed Madge, who sat speech-

less for a long time. A great struggle was going on in the little creature's heart; and Will, guessing that it was so, more than once passed his hand sympathetically over her hair. Finally he took her hot hands in one of his, and held them with gentle firmness.

'Bed-time, children,' said Mrs. Vancroft, hours after the usual hour for retiring, and the youngsters rose obediently at once.

Then, to the surprise of all, Madge said, 'Isa isn't going to leave home. Baby and Ella would cry so. And mamma. I'll go! That will be best. Besides, no one needs me at home, and—and—and—Some one would have wished me to do as you think best.'

Before any one had recovered from the surprise, Madge was off to her room. She undressed in hot haste and dived under the bedclothes, trembling and stifling her sobs, until Isa, who shared her bed, got in beside her.

'Was it very hard to say, dear?' Isa whispered softly.

'Nonsense,' said Madge.

'What a queer child she is!' Mrs. Vancroft had exclaimed when Madge disappeared; and Jack added, 'Madgie is going to be a brick after all.' Auntie made no remark, and Will only said, 'Poor little Madge.'

The offer so suddenly made by Madge seemed to have decided the point regarding the girls, for nothing further was said about Isa leaving; and when the time came for the necessary papers to be filled up, Madge's name was inserted as a matter of course.

She seemed quite reconciled to the plan, as far as any one could judge, for she was very reticent of her opinions, though demonstrative enough in some things. Not one of all the family knew how naturally shy and timid she was. They only knew that Madge disliked taking the initiative or in any way acting deliberately on her own responsibility. 'Madge's self-assertion lies in protesting,' Jack was wont to say. Not even Isa guessed how deeply rooted was the poor child's antipathy to strangers and strange places. No one ever knew what fearful anticipations Madge had when all was finally arranged, and she was told that she would probably leave home soon. 'It will kill me, I think,' she often said to herself, but she never once gave utterance to a regret or expostulation; and Mrs. Vancroft congratulated herself upon having decided wisely in choosing Madge instead of Isa.





CHAPTER VI.

LAUNCHING LIFE-BARQUES.

WILL sailed away full of hope. Will became immersed in study. The time for Madge to leave drew near, and the nearer it came the more terrible grew her fears.

But there was a pleasant surprise in store for her.

Although Will's time and thoughts were very much engrossed by his studies, he did not forget the interests of his young brothers and sisters, and during the course of cross-questioning which he instituted regarding Madge's future home, he discovered that it was quite possible to have another child admitted at the same time.

Will immediately seized upon this important intelligence as a means of helping Madge, as well as of relieving the mother yet more.

Nothing was said to any of the children, for Isa's

ready acquiescence could be counted upon. Her placid, not very sensitive disposition could adapt itself readily to any change of circumstance; and it was only when she had to go through preliminary examinations that Will informed her of the proposed change of plan. Then he dwelt upon the benefit her society would be to poor Madge, and how all-important it was for both girls to get a good education. Isa's clear good sense accepted the necessity at once without any distressing demonstrations, so the whole matter was quietly arranged without Madge knowing anything about it.

When all was finally settled, Will took the two girls for a walk in the Queen's Park. They climbed to an unfrequented spot among the crags of Arthur's Seat, and when they were seated among the gorse at a point overlooking Duddingston Loch and village, and conversation had drifted—by Will's design—back to the old home and the good father whose influence was to stretch into a far future, the brother told Madge that Isa was to be her companion in exile.

Never till that moment had either Isa or Will guessed how deeply the child had suffered, or how much she had been prepared to sacrifice. Her whole face, usually so sad and self-contained, lit up with an exceeding gladness. For a moment her sight felt dim, and every sense seemed reeling.



DUDDINGSTON LOCH.

She clutched Will's hand frantically, and gasped, 'Oh, Will! Is it—can it be true?'

'Yes, dear, quite true! and I am very glad, for I could not bear the thought of you going alone; and Isa, kind lassie that she is, is glad for your sake too.'

'Yes, that I am indeed,' said Isa heartily.

Then Madge flung herself upon Will's breast and sobbed, 'Oh, Will! oh, Will! I feel as if I had got a bit of heaven!'

'You have been very brave, my little Madgie,' he said; 'we did not know how hard it was upon you, for you have concealed your pain most unselfishly. Now I am going to tell you a dream which I had not long ago. I scarcely know how much of it was a vision in sleep or a day-dream, but I want you to keep it in your hearts all the time you are at the Institution.'

'It must be something very, very good to think about if we are to remember it so long,' said Isa.

Will looked away to the sea, and across it to the blue hills of Fife, then beyond those hills to the cloud-flecked sky, and for a few minutes his

'Thoughts were with his heart, and that was far away.'

Presently he spoke. 'I dreamed that years had gone by, and the time for you to return home had arrived. I thought that Jack was back from a long voyage, and had grown such a big brown fellow,

with money in his pockets, and his own generous heart unchanged. I thought that wee Ben was doing what he could to be what father hoped for us all. And Ella and baby had grown, of course, but were still the *good little uns!* Mother seemed stronger and like what she was when I was the baby and all you wild bairns had not come to take the life out of her. And my two lassies—they had returned to me all that my brightest dreams had pictured.

‘And, girls, I dreamed that we were all back in our old home,—the manse,—and that *I* was the minister in father’s place.’

‘Oh, what a sweet dream!’ whispered Isa. ‘I wonder could it ever come true?’

‘Wilder dreams have been realized before now. With God’s blessing I do not see why it might not come true. I would not have repeated it if I had not felt within myself that He will help me to make it come true.’

Then Will went on to say how they would all look forward and hope and work, never love each other less, and never do anything that would vex the good father who had taught them in earliest infancy to ‘look up and trust.’

Isa responded to all he said with words of child-like faith, and Will, rather disappointed at Madge’s continued silence, glanced often at her, hoping for

some expression of her thoughts. But not one word came until they were returning home, and Isa had loitered behind plucking flowers.

Then Madge gave Will one intense look of fervent love and gratitude—a look that thrilled through his heart to be treasured there with like memorials of the little sister whose efforts to attain unto heavenly heights were swiftly crowned with success.

‘Call me “Childie,” please, Will. I’d like to have you calling me that now, and when I am hearing papa call me “Childie” again, I shall like to know that one at home thinks of me by the same name.’

Madge’s words had a strange effect upon Will. They seemed to open her heart before him, and he could see into some of its depths at last—could comprehend in part some of the strangely blended feelings which she found so difficult to control, so impossible to express. He also learned from her words that he had gained a strong hold upon her affections, and that now she was willing enough to take him in father’s place ; but Will did not understand the full import of what she had said until years afterwards, when her little speech, so strangely worded, came back upon his recollection with new significance.

The going away was robbed of half its terrors for Madge. She would have Isa with her to answer all questions and to come between herself and all

difficulties. Alas! poor Madge! She had yet to learn that though others may do much to lighten our burden, we cannot shift the responsibilities of life upon other shoulders than our own.

Madge had not been long in her new home when she began to learn that lesson, and it fell upon her spirit like a heavy cloud; but she struggled bravely, and as time went past she learned to throw off, in a great measure, her natural timidity, and to do her duties with composure of manner if not of heart.

Naturally fond of books, and the education to be derived from them, she soon took a high position in her classes, and never failed to show the deepest interest in her studies. Yet underneath the routine of daily life flowed an under-current of hopes and wishes which had no goal below the clouds.

There was one gladness, however, which brightened everything else, and that was the weekly visit home. 'Will on Saturday' was the hope which held Madge up during the week. Often, when she and Isa reached the Institution gate on the morning of that day, Will was waiting to greet them. Then how merrily would the three proceed homewards! Saturday was to them what it is to most children—the golden day of all the week.

Whatever were Will's duties or pleasures, he never permitted anything to prevent him from escorting his sisters back to the Institution on the Sunday

afternoons. In the quiet of the Sabbath gloaming he walked and talked with them, encouraging the little creatures with many kind words. Isa was soon big enough to slip her arm through his, but Madge, though quite as tall, always continued to put her hand in Will's as a small, confiding child does ; and if at any time his grasp relaxed, a gentle pressure would remind him that she needed his hand to lead her.

Days, weeks, months glided past. A year sped, and another, and another. Will took high honours at the University, and steadily worked his way upward, while men spoke of him as one who would make his mark in the world before long.

Jack gladdened the home hearts by turning up unexpectedly at all times and seasons, with the joyous spirit and fun-loving propensities of old. He was always the bearer of a wonderful collection of curiosities. These were of a useful description always, and brought from the far lands he visited. Every member of the family found that Jack had remembered his or her peculiar tastes when choosing these miscellaneous articles. Yet the wonderful part of it was, that though Jack always arrived from a voyage with countless presents, he never failed to have a little packet of money to drop into mother's hand for 'Ella.'

He had a cherished scheme of providing for all

her future wants, and never spent a penny upon himself which he could avoid spending. Thus Jack's savings came to be put aside for wee Ella, who was known before long in the household as 'Jack's girl.' The young sailor's visits were indeed a great delight, and broke the monotony of the uneventful days, for he seemed to bring with him a portion of the changeful beauty and wonder of the ocean.

To Will especially was Jack welcome. To his brother, and to no one else, could Will speak confidentially of the many anxieties which lay in his path ; and Jack could bring, in a manner peculiarly his own, the sunshine of a bright hopeful soul to bear upon Will's difficulties.

Then, too, Jack always affirmed that Will's counsel and sober sense were to a volatile sailor what ballast is to a ship ! and thus the two contrasted characters served to sustain each other.

Sometimes Auntie would come and stay for a few weeks, but it is to be feared that only Will and old Janet fully appreciated such visits—Will because he was fully alive to her sterling worth, notwithstanding some little peculiarities ; Janet because 'the bairns hae to behave themselves, and no' drive a' body daft with their noise when Miss Vancroft comes.'

And so the years glided by. Will completed his university course, and immediately got an appoint-

ment as assistant to a city clergyman. His eloquence soon began to draw crowds to that church, and Will might have found his feet in perilous places but for the constant thought that he did not only fill his *own* niche in the world's great temple ; he was in father's place too, and must walk humbly and warily before his God.





CHAPTER VII.

DREAMING OF HOME.

NE Sunday afternoon, when Will was taking Isa and Madge back to school, he said, 'Do you know, girls, that this is your last session from home?'

'Oh, yes! we know,' replied Isa, smiling; 'we don't forget that, you may be sure.'

'And my dream, is it also well remembered?'

'Of course, and it does seem as though it were coming true every bit. Now doesn't it?'

'Sometimes,' Madge chimed in, with her slow, grave manner, 'I think it would not be good for— for some of us if it were all to come true. And yet, oh, Will, if I could have a bit of the dream, though I know I haven't deserved it!'

'You have deserved it, Childie; no other member of the family has had to fight so sore a fight as you. We are all easy-going creatures, made by Nature to

take the world easily, but you have had to struggle with queer ways born with you (as Janet says), consequently we don't deserve so much credit as you do for being what we are.'

'Then you think I have conquered some things?'

How eagerly she asked the question, and Will, looking tenderly into her uplifted eyes, told her that she had indeed become all that father and brother had hoped. Then Isa added enthusiastically, 'Madge is the favourite of every one in the Institution. She is as good and unselfish and kind as can be. All we have left to wish for is that she were a little more lively. She does not join in our play much, or make fun at any time.'

'Fun never was Childie's forte. She would not be our nice wee mouse if she were an ordinary fun-loving lass;' and Will laughed and squeezed Madge's hand, but at the same time he looked a little anxiously at her, and by and by he asked,—

'Why don't you like fun?'

'I try to like it,' she answered wearily; 'but somehow it feels as if I must cry when I am wanted to laugh. I like best to be still and dream.'

'Beware of day-dreaming, Childie.'

'I wonder, is it day-dreaming to fancy what heaven is like, and to wish oneself there?'

Will did not reply, and Madge did not seem to be seeking an answer to her words; but when they

parted, the 'good-bye' between them was more than usually affectionate, and frequently afterwards Will found his thoughts reverting to what Madge had said on that occasion, and he wished the Christmas holidays would come, so that he could have her beside him more.

But when December was drawing near, a child in the Institution was laid up with scarlet fever, and the others were not allowed to go out, lest they might carry infection with them. The disappointment to Isa and Madge was keen for a few days. Then Isa took ill, and all Madge's regrets about spending the holidays at school vanished before the greater grief which had come.

Madge was not allowed to see Isa,—whose illness was very serious,—but she haunted the corridors leading to the sick-room, her eager eyes mutely asking the passers-by for news of her sister.

For a long time the pitying attendants could only shake their heads and hurry past, leaving poor Madge to suffer all the tortures of suspense; but after a time the reports from the sick-room became more hopeful, and finally Isa was pronounced convalescent. During all the weeks of her illness Will presented himself at the Institution every morning, and his visits were the sole comfort which Madge had. She was allowed to stroll about the grounds with him, and during that time her thoughts,

so heedfully concealed from others, flowed forth in beautiful language. It was a perfect revelation to Will, and he encouraged her to unburden her heart to him. Every day seemed to open a new page of her character, and reveal some spiritual beauty which he had never dreamed lay hid behind those usually sealed lips.

When there came strong hopes of Isa's recovery, Will and Madge allowed themselves to talk again of the future, and of the hope they had of being together at home as of old.

Also it seemed that the wild bit of Will's dream was going to be realized, for his father's successor had been called to another parish, and it was certain, if Will chose to present himself as a candidate, he would receive the living.

Will thought no position could be so enviable as that of minister in his native place, but he hesitated because people told him that he could do so much more for his family by remaining where he was.

'I can't make up my mind just yet,' Will said to Madge, as they strolled round the Institution grounds. 'I would not like to go, if by so doing I should deprive you all of a better home.'

'A better home!' Madge looked long into the sky, then added, 'There is only one home that could be better than the dear old manse.'

'My Childie,' Will exclaimed, with a sudden thrill

of alarm, 'I wish you would not speak like that. For months past you have been making remarks like that, as if your mind were always dwelling upon—'

He stopped abruptly, choked by a thought which he had never put into words before, but which had obtruded itself in a vague way more than once.

'My mind does dwell very much upon thoughts of that other home,' Madge answered quietly; 'and often, dear Will, I think—and hope.'

'Childie—Childie—don't say more!' Will whispered with tears.

'It will be nice to get back to the manse, Will,' she went on. 'Oh, very nice! You don't know how I dream of being there. I have so longed for my old home. I hope it was not wrong to do so, but indeed I could not help it. It was such a quiet, pretty, sweet home. Ah, yes, do go back to the manse, Will! It will be better than a big town house and a heap of money; for you will have time there to think, and rest, and be happy.'

Will at once made up his mind, and promised Madge that the whole of the dream should be realized, and that before long the family should be back in the old home, and he was fully rewarded by the gladness which overspread his sister's pensive features, as she thanked him again and again, adding, 'Oh that the time were come! What a happy time it will be!'

But in one moment all those delightful anticipations were clouded over by Madge taking the fever as Isa had done.

As soon as the dire tidings reached Will, he hurried to the Institution full of forebodings which were only too soon realized. The doctor, he found, had pronounced the case to be a very serious one. The period of anxiety through which Madge had passed had greatly weakened her power of resisting the disease, which rapidly gained possession of her. Will was allowed to visit the sick-room, but his presence could afford no pleasure to Madge, who was wandering in the wild regions of delirium.

How it wrung her brother's heart to hear her unconscious talk about the manse, the father she had mourned so deeply, the trees and birds and flowers among which her infancy had passed, and the home circle where she had often felt herself to be misunderstood, yet where her best affections were centred.

Will could only turn sorrowfully away, and commit her to the care of their Heavenly Father. There was nothing that he or any one could do but wait the result in prayerful submission, for all that love and skill could do was being done for Madge. She was far more efficiently nursed in that sick ward than she could have been at home.

Mrs. Vancroft had cried and worried everybody

around her while Isa was ill, and now she cried and worried again ; but when Will suggested that some one from home should go and nurse Madge, his mother protested indignantly. She was not wanting in affection, poor woman, but her mind was small, like her person, and her selfishness had been fostered through life. Of course Will was not permitted to constitute himself nurse, as he so much desired, and he was obliged to confess that such a proceeding could do no good, but harm to himself and Madge.

Her illness was not lingering, as Isa's had been, but sharp and sudden, and the doctor said that a very few days would bring it to a crisis ; so until that time Will wandered racked with anxiety, yet striving to be patient.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE DESIRED HAVEN.



WHILE the dark shadow thus hung over the Vancrofts' home, a gleam of light pierced the dark cloud.

On New Year's Eve Jack returned from a long voyage. He was brown and stalwart, and in spite of the terrible

anxiety regarding Madge, the family could not but rejoice and be glad over the welcome arrival. Moreover, Jack contrived to raise their hopes

about the invalid ; he always took a sanguine view of things, and he had not known, as Will did, the change which had come over Madge ; nor had he heard her speak one word such as those which had led his elder brother to dread the worst for her.

‘I was determined,’ said Jack, ‘that I would be home for New Year’s Day, so that we might welcome in the season with gladness ; and though I have come to find you all very sad, I think we must not forget to be thankful. Things might have been much worse.’

‘Yes,’ replied his mother ; ‘Isa’s illness was very tedious and alarming, and I was so afraid that Will would take fever, for he has gone to inquire after her I don’t know how often every day.’

‘Will has always been extra tender over his lassies,’ said Jack.

‘I must say,’ answered Mrs. Vancroft, taking no notice of Jack’s words, ‘that it was thoughtful of Auntie to offer to take Isa away to recruit. You can’t think how Isa has grown, and she is as amiable and useful as ever.’

‘And poor Madge?’ asked Jack, who had not been home for two years, and was curious to know what changes had occurred during his absence,—‘and Madge, is she growing into a domestic and conventional young woman?’

‘She is growing into an angel, I think,’ said Will, rising suddenly and leaving the room.

Jack turned to his mother in much alarm. ‘Is not Will over anxious?’ he asked; ‘why should he be fearing about Madge? she has not been ill many days.’

‘Will has taken some queer fancy about her lately. He showed me a little poem she wrote for him not long ago,—really a clever poem for so young a girl to compose,—and he said he believed his Childie was ripening for eternity. These were his very words. Now is it not foolish of him to take up such a notion, and thoughtless, too, to frighten me about the child? You know, Jack, Madge always did have queer fancies and ways, and lately I think she has been speaking a great deal to Will, and perhaps infected him with a little of her own oddness. He has made so much of her since your poor father died.’

‘Will is not easily influenced by fancy, mother,’ Jack replied thoughtfully. Then, finding the hour to be late, he followed Will’s example, and retired for the night.

Will sat in his room alone, waiting to see in the New Year. The passing away of the old year was always a solemn time to Will, and he preferred to spend those minutes alone with Him who holds our times in His hand. Quietly he went over his past

life, reading himself with a faithful conscience, and drawing support from that source which never fails. He was very self-absorbed, yet, curiously entwined with even his inmost thoughts about his own spiritual life, were mingled thoughts of Madge. He strove not to dwell upon that theme, but to confide her in all trust to the Lord ; but in spite of all his efforts, pictures of his young sister would obtrude themselves before his mind's eye.

At last it suddenly seemed to him as though he were being called—urgently called—to go to Madge at once. In vain Will tried to dismiss the fancy. In vain he battled manfully with it, believing it to be the dream of a heated imagination. Back upon his heart and brain it came, more and more forcibly, until every effort to resist it was overcome.

Guided by that strange impulse, he stole out of the house when all its other inmates were asleep, and hurrying, as though dream-led, Will reached the Institution gates.

He never had thought upon the lateness of the hour, of the certainty of finding the gates closed, or the probability that he would not be admitted. He had forgotten the rule which was followed of sending for the relatives of any child as soon as it was known that the illness would prove fatal. All these things were forgotten, or held in abeyance by the subtle power which was leading Will where it would.

But when he reached the gates, he found them open, and a doctor's brougham just coming down the drive. Will sprang to the carriage window, and the doctor,



recognizing him, leaned out. 'I am glad you have come, Vancroft; I was just going to

your house, for — there has been a very sudden change. You can go up and see the poor lassie. The sooner the better, my dear fellow.'

As if still dream-led, Will walked on, rang the bell, and was admitted at once. The servant, surprised to see him there, asked, 'Have you had a message, sir? Do you know?'

'I have spoken with the doctor. Take me to her;' and the kind-hearted woman, wiping the tears from her face, silently led him to Madge's sick-room.

There was a deep silence throughout the spacious building, for all its young inmates had long since gone to sleep, not knowing that the Dark Angel had come to one of their number.

In the sick-room a motherly nurse, with the matron of the Institution, sat watching the sleep of Madge—a sleep so like death, that when Will's eyes first fell upon her he thought she was indeed dead.

But the nurse's uplifted finger told him that a 'trembling of life' was yet left, and he paused at the foot of the bed.

The fever flush had left Madge's face, which now wore the grand exalted look with which Death glorifies whoever he touches; but through the solemnity of that expression there stole a child-like smile—Madge's own rare and beautiful smile. Her

brother gazed upon the child in speechless anguish. All her quaint and curious speeches came back to his recollection then, pointing to this. To death? That was what she had meant. All his plans for her future were to go down to a grave. All her longings for home were to be satisfied in eternity. As he watched the faint yet lovely smiles flicker through the shadows that had gathered on her face, Will's longing to know what her thoughts were, and his dread that she would go without one parting word, overcame every other consideration.

'Speak to me one word before you leave us, Childie,' he murmured piteously. Without a movement beyond the lifting of her eyelids, she looked up and saw Will. The smile broke again over her features, and she spoke in a low tone,—

'Papa dear! I had such a strange dream. I dreamed that you were dead—and we had all left the manse. Everything was different and sad—and it weighed upon my heart. I am so glad it was only a dream—one of your Childie's foolish dreams, papa.'

'Madge, darling, do you not know me?' said Will, and, stooping, he quickly drew her head to his heart as he had done when, years before, he found her prostrate on their father's grave. 'Oh, my little Madge, don't you know it's Will?'

She gazed at him with a startled, wide-eyed

astonishment, then a glad light flashed from her eyes, and she exclaimed, 'Oh, Will! Dear, dear Will! I did so long for you and home. Oh, I thought I was wandering in a dark lonely place by myself and had lost my way! But you have found me, Will—and I am safe. And you will take me home now, won't you?—home to the manse. Papa will be wondering where his Childie has gone. Oh, I am so tired! Take me home, Will;' and she turned her head wearily to his breast again.

He did not speak, he could not, but softly kissed her, and she again fell into the sleep of sinking nature.

'Will she not wake once more?' he asked the nurse, who had drawn near and was tenderly folding the girl's hands upon her bosom.

'I think not,' the woman said. But at that moment Madge opened her eyes again, and looked into Will's face.

'And so you've come to take me Home, papa? I am so glad. It was nice to be returning to the manse, and Will was very good to me in your place. But I'm tired . . . The manse . . . and Will . . . were dear, but . . . heaven and you, papa, are better still. Hold your Childie close . . . and fast . . . dear papa.'

She spoke like one in a dream, but a smile lighted up her face, and in another moment she was

gone to the Father whose love our mortal relationships but dimly shadow.

It was a glad New Year's morning to Madge, though she left a darkened home behind her. In her hours of quiet thoughtfulness she had been gradually prepared for the change that awaited her.

Her brothers carried her to rest beside her father ; and when the time came that Will was elected minister of his native parish, the whole family returned to the manse.

Ah! the going back can never be like the past time. It was with subdued gladness indeed that the Vancrofts took possession of their old home. The one who had suffered most upon leaving it, who had longed more than all to return, who had fought a harder battle than any of the others, who had conquered most, — that one was not, and it was a long time before Will could learn to think resignedly of Madge's swift voyage to the desired haven.

She was not forgotten. Isa strove to make a companion of Ella instead, but no sister could take the place of the one who had shared her childhood's joys and sorrows.

Jack, and even Ben, discovered, when she was gone, what a centre of interest Madge had been. Her little vagaries were all forgotten, but the keen wit she had shown, the help she had given, the work

and play in which she had so generously joined, before the dark days came, were remembered.

To Will she had become the very dearest object in life, and he could never speak of her without faltering. His mother and aunt were often surprised to find how much a wish which Madge had expressed, or some sentiment she had bashfully uttered, continued to influence Will's conduct.

All the brothers and sisters grew up and made homes for themselves, and ceased to require Will's guidance, though they never forgot that he had stood to them in father's place.

But the little grave beside that of the minister always remained to remind Will of 'the bairns.'

And when, years afterwards, a little daughter, not unlike Madge, and named after her, looked up into his face as his young sister had done, Will's heart thrilled with ever wakeful memories of her who was his 'Childie' for evermore.

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